



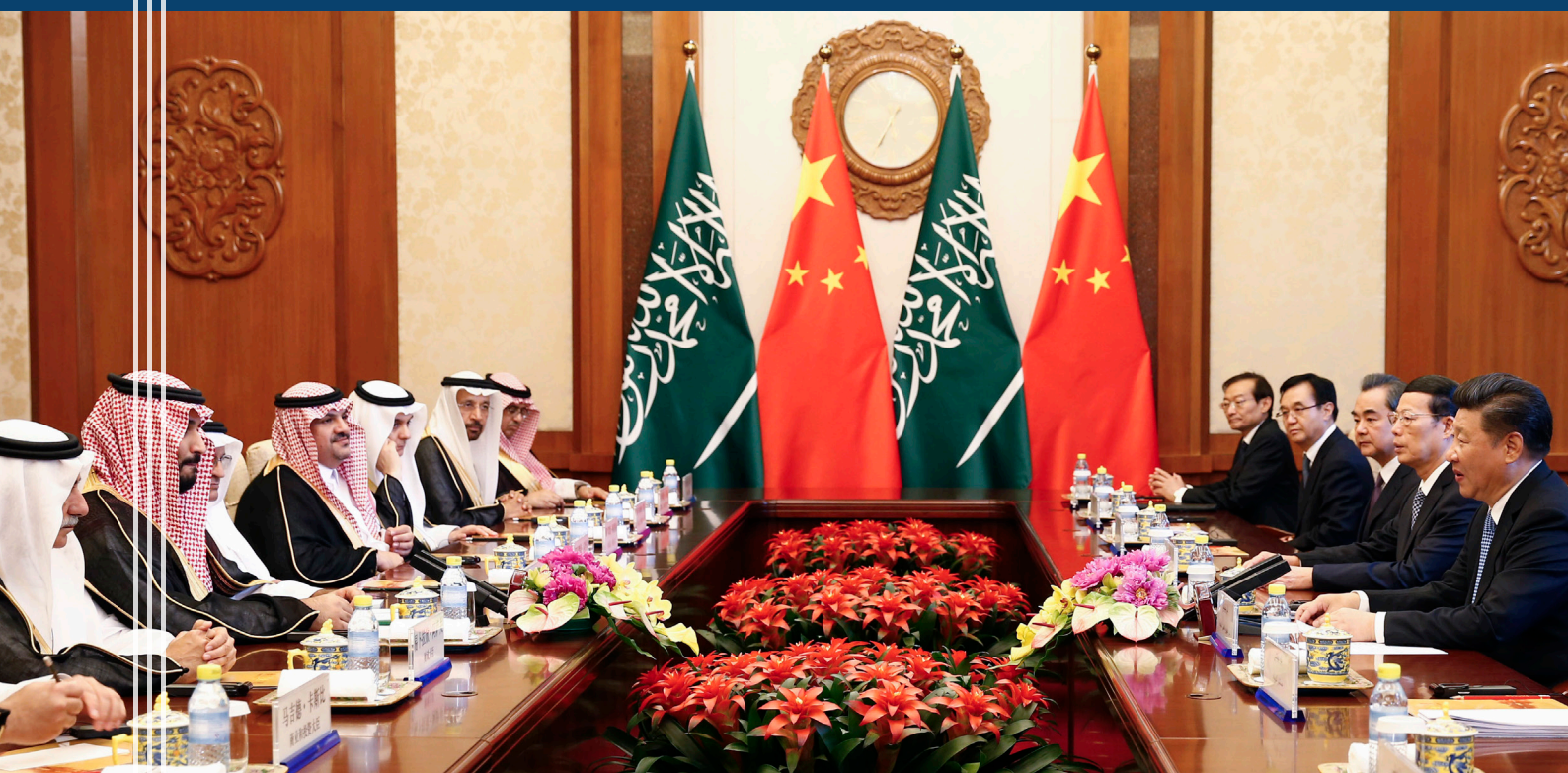
## **China in search of 'legitimate' great power intervention**

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# CHINA AND THE CHALLENGES IN GREATER MIDDLE EAST

## Conference report

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## INTRODUCTION

Lars Erslev Andersen, Yang Jiang and  
Camilla Sørensen

This collection of short papers is an outcome of an international conference entitled *China and the Challenges in Greater Middle East*, organized by the Danish Institute for International Studies and Copenhagen University on 10 November 2015. The conference sought answers to the following questions: Is the balance of power between the US and China changing in the Persian Gulf? Will China's increasing economic interests in the Gulf lead to a more activist Chinese foreign and security policy there? What are the expectations the Arab Gulf States have of China, and will China meet them?

The background to the conference was China's increasing interest in the Persian Gulf simultaneously with what has been interpreted as America's gradual retreat from the region. Even though the US has been providing the security umbrella in the region, its handling of ethnic conflicts and civil wars has irritated members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Political developments, including 9/11 and the Arab Spring, have forced the GCC member states to take action to avoid the spread of democratic movements and revolutions while seeking to handle their own affairs without interference from the US, the EU and the UN. Problems in GCC-US relations have also made GCC states look eastwards for new partners, providing a power vacuum and opportunity for China to insert itself.

The Middle East is in a process of radical restructuring following the Arab Spring of 2011, the escalation of sectarian conflict in Iraq and the outbreak and development of the civil war in Syria. These circumstances have given rise to enhanced security concerns. In order to understand the post-9/11 regional security dynamics, we need to challenge the oft-repeated perception of American hegemony and analyze the rising importance of

Asia in the region, especially the role of China. Whereas US Middle East policy has been subjected to endless academic analyses, this new axis between the Persian Gulf and China has not received much attention.

China has been expanding its economic involvement in the Persian Gulf, not least in oil: the majority of its oil comes from the region. Although China is trying to diversify its energy supplies away from the Middle East, it will remain dependent on the Arab States and Iran for years to come. With expanding trade, investment and contract work in the Persian Gulf, China is seeking to protect its assets and citizens there. As argued, and as shown in the papers by Camilla T.N. Sørensen and Miwa Hirono, China can no longer follow the old diplomatic strategy of keeping a low profile and keeping business and politics separate. China especially has learned from the crises in Libya and Sudan and is gradually changing its policy from one of non-intervention to what is often termed 'active mediation', 'limited intervention' or 'creative involvement'.

Doubts remain, both within the GCC and in Chinese policy-making circles, as to the extent to which China should be strategically involved in the Middle East. China is not seeking to challenge or replace the US as the security provider in the region. However, there is no doubt that 'active pragmatism' has become China's guiding diplomatic strategy and that we will see more political and strategic activity from China in the region while it continues to pursue its economic interests. China will also play a more active role in fighting extremism at home, as well as in the Greater Middle East, including Afghanistan and Iraq. How will this combination of strategies be played out?

In order to address these themes and discuss the questions mentioned above, we brought researchers from China and the Arab Gulf states together and added a few other researchers who focus more broadly on China's new approach to the international

economy and foreign and security policy, as well as on confronting extremism.

We are grateful to the participants in the conference for agreeing to summarize their presentations in the form of short papers, thus making it possible to disseminate the conclusions of the conference to a broader audience.

### **Energy and commercial interests as main drivers**

Whereas China once viewed developments and events in the Middle East primarily through the lens of a revolutionary ideology, its relations with Middle Eastern states are now driven mainly by energy and commercial interests. It has a strong and growing need for access to energy and natural resources in order to maintain economic growth. The Middle East, in particular the Persian Gulf, is the main region involved, with Saudi Arabia and Iran both being major suppliers of oil to China. The Persian Gulf as a whole is China's largest oil provider, and it is estimated that by 2020 annual trade between China and the Persian Gulf will top \$350 billion. A free-trade agreement with China is also a priority for the GCC, and Chinese state-owned companies are continuously bidding for contracts in the Persian Gulf. There is a clear Chinese presence in regional commerce.

The Middle East has thus been China's major oil and gas supplier, and it falls into the category of 'China's greater neighborhood' as far as Chinese foreign policy is concerned. At the same time, China is diversifying its energy suppliers among regional states and states outside the region, as well as developing new supply routes and port facilities. According to Jiadong Zhang, China needs to rethink its policy towards the Middle East because of the declining oil price, terrorist threats and the lower demand expected for fossil fuels in the future. Marc Lanteigne instead sees China's energy consumption shifting away from domestic coal to cleaner, imported fossil fuels. For

the foreseeable future, however, Zhang and Lanteigne agree that the region remains important for China's energy security, as well as for other commercial interests, as part of the trade route to Europe and Africa, and also as export markets in their own right. This is also significant in that several of the regional states are also members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), one of the new China-sponsored international development banks that are seeking to expand infrastructure investment through international collaboration.

Compared to its limited involvement in security, China is aggressively and steadily consolidating energy and other commercial ties with the region. Marc Lanteigne's paper discusses China's energy diplomacy in the Greater Middle East. Although perceived as hypocritical by some regional actors for just taking the economic benefits without military involvement, China's pursuit of economic interests without security involvement has achieved significant results, in particular in diversifying the energy trade for China and in establishing itself as a pivotal alternative consumer for the region. Regional instabilities, including the Arab Spring and the rise of Islamic State, call into question the status of the Middle East as a provider of 'energy security' to China. However, as the most important region for energy supply, the Greater Middle East is a focus of China's economic diplomacy, including through a free-trade agreement with the GCC, involvement in OBOR and membership in AIIB.

In particular, several papers stress that China's 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and '21<sup>st</sup>-century Maritime Silk Road' (Belt and Road or OBOR) initiative is giving another boost to relations between China and the greater Middle East. China sees the region as a knot in the initiative. The OBOR initiative involves the Greater Middle East in both terrestrial and maritime routes as both important points of connectivity and economic partners. But because the definition of the initiative is still vague and ever changing in its scope, states



in the region continue to compete for China's favor.

### **To intervene or not to intervene**

The principle of non-intervention is one of China's key traditional foreign and security policy guidelines. Due especially to China's expanding global role, interests and capabilities, however, adhering to this principle is becoming increasingly challenging for Chinese leaders.

Generally, China has started to interfere in developments and conflicts in other regions and states. In response to several international conflicts and crises, Chinese leaders have presented diplomatic suggestions and offered to play a mediating role. Beijing still insists that it is sticking to the principle of non-intervention. It is clear, however, that the current Chinese foreign and security policy constitutes a more flexible and pragmatic Chinese interpretation – and implementation – of the principle of non-intervention.

As Camilla T. N. Sørensen notes, China is becoming more pragmatic and flexible in its diplomatic approach toward the Greater Middle East. Growing energy and commercial interests and ties are resulting in a new presence and a great-power role for China in the Middle East, which coincides with the latter's growing expectations of China's ability and willingness to play a stabilizing role in regional affairs. The regional states, on the other hand, increasingly look to China as a provider of global and regional public goods.

However, in contrast to the clear Chinese presence in regional commerce, China is playing a small, albeit growing role in regional politics and security. The Chinese leadership is still very careful and uncertain about how to put its growing capabilities and influence in the region into play and to what extent. In short, China's role and activities in regional politics and security are growing, but this is more out of necessity than as part of an overall strategic ambition or plan.

Like many other states outside the region, China has had to make a rapid adjustment to its Middle East approach and policies following the Arab Spring. Beijing still is attempting to retain a neutral stance on the many conflicts and uprisings in the region, while it continues to seek to improve economic as well as political relations in the region. However, China's neutral stance is increasingly being challenged and is leading to criticism both inside and outside the region. For example, China's unwillingness to support harder sanctions against Syria's President Assad has been sharply criticized by the US and Europe, as well as by several Arab governments. Such criticism has contributed to a more active Chinese approach and growing conflict-mediation efforts. For example, China came up with the four-point proposal for Syria in late 2012, calling on all sides to stop fighting and initiate a political transition and an inclusive economic development process. The proposal, however, generated little international interest. In May 2013, China also sought to take a more active role in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a four-point proposal – similar to that involving the conflict in Syria – calling for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and stressing diplomatic dialogue and inclusive economic development. Consequently, China has become much more actively involved in conflict mediation in the Middle East in recent years, as Miwa Hirono also points out in relation to the development of the Chinese approach and policies towards Afghanistan.

That is, China's diplomatic skills are becoming more sophisticated as its interests become more widely spread geographically and multifaceted. Still, China is playing a wait-and-see game in the region when it comes to political and military conflicts. China usually presents itself as impartial, neither government-biased nor rebel-biased, and builds on the assumption that both or all sides are responsible for the initiation, escalation and solution to the conflict. Chinese proposals often have a focus on building trust and the necessary conditions for inclusive economic



development, that is, economic development that includes and benefits all sides in a conflict so that it becomes too costly for all sides to return to violence. Chinese proposals and mediation strategies often refrain from taking a position on the question of right or wrong and hence on who to blame.

Jiadong Zhang's chapter represents a widely held Chinese perspective that China is regarded as a fair arbitrator in the region. China prides itself in helping broker the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5 Plus One. However, to some regional states, China's reluctance to pick sides means siding with the other side. Taking no risk can be the greatest risk for China, as both Imad Mansour and N. Janardhan point out.

Regarding what capabilities to put into play, China, unlike the US, does not have formal alliances in the Middle East or air and naval bases in the region. And despite recent advances, the Chinese navy and air force still cannot match those of the US. It has, however, other forms of leverage such as its growing economic influence and the attractiveness of access to its market and to its investments and aid. Beijing has started to use such leverage more proactively to protect and promote Chinese security, political and economic interests, as well as Chinese citizens and their activities in the Middle East.

### **Filling the vacuum created by US withdrawal: balancing games**

In the context of the reduced US presence in the region, its 'pivot to Asia' and the shift of economic power from the West to the East as perceived by the region, both China and states in the Greater Middle East are pursuing balanced diplomacy and playing balancing games.

Compared with the earlier ideological bias in its foreign policy, China is enhancing ties with a wide array of states and regional organisations in the Greater Middle East regardless whether they are allies of the US or whether

they are friends with each other, including Iran and the GCC states, Israel and Palestine, and Iraq and United Arab Emirates (UAE). Moreover, as Jiadong Zhang argues, China now also needs to balance its relations with the Middle East and its own global image and status.

The states in the region are also playing a balancing game between the US and China. There is a general trend in the region to 'look East', building ties with Asia and particularly China. Despite their efforts to be more independent in security policy, the GCC states have not succeeded in this, nor have they developed a unified security framework. They still rely on the major powers, in particular the US, to provide security, but Imad Mansour does not see an opportunity for China to become a security pillar for the region in the foreseeable future: it will not set the parameters of regional security architectures, as the US has so far done. There is neither the supply of the role of pillar by China, nor a demand for such a role by the GCC, not least because there are important points of divergence in the security perspectives between the two sides, and China's perceived avoidance of regional conflicts and competition is also seen as an impediment. Personal ties and understandings of each other's political mind-sets take years to cultivate as well, as Mansour suggests. Along similar lines, Jiadong Zhang concludes that in the foreseeable future China will not serve as a substitute for the US due to 'China's limited capacity and self-restrained traditional culture'. Marc Lanteign is more optimistic that China can quickly close its knowledge gap about the complexity of the region. All authors underline the importance of mutual understanding and deep engagement in enhancing relations between China and the states in the Persian Gulf.

While N. Janardhan argues that 'the United States is worried about Chinese inroads in the Middle East', he also underlines that there is the potential for great-power cooperation in Middle East affairs too. He specifically

observes that the cooperative relationship built up between 'the U.S. and Russia-China duo' to reach a deal on Iran could be repeated, together with the GCC, to reach a deal on Syria.

## **Summary**

In short, there are growing expectations in the region of China's ability and willingness to play a stabilizing role in regional political and security affairs. The regional states increasingly also look to China as a provider of global and regional public goods. The Chinese are not yet ready to play such a role and take on such responsibilities. One reason is that this risks conflicting with the long-held principle of non-intervention and also with China's self-perception as a different kind of great power: in contrast to the Western great powers, China does not intervene in the politics of other regions and states, nor does it have alliances or military bases outside its own territory. Another reason is that the Chinese still do not have the diplomatic and military capabilities to play such a role – to fill the vacuum if the US withdraws from the region. There seems to be a clash of expectations. On the one hand, China focuses on protecting and promoting its energy and commercial interests; in order to do so, it is willing to become more actively involved in regional politics and security. On the other hand, the regional states expect China to assume more holistic concerns about regional development, stability and security and to play a strong and active role in regional politics and security.



## CHINA'S DIPLOMACY IN THE GULF REGION: ENERGY AND (IN)SECURITY

Marc Lanteigne

إطلب العلم ولو في الصين  
(‘Seek knowledge, even in China.’)  
*Traditional hadith*

### China's Middle East Challenges

Since the 1990s, China's foreign and security policy has significantly diversified to include the issue of energy security, especially as Beijing began to seek deepened partnerships with energy-producing states and regions, including in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Unlike the histories of the United States, Europe and Japan, China's history in Middle Eastern affairs has been much shorter and as a result, Beijing is developing energy relationships with MENA at a disadvantage with respect to its knowledge of and diplomacy with the region. At the same time,

China's longstanding practice of separating economics from politics in its cross-regional diplomacy, and especially in its relations with resource-rich developing states, has at times failed in the Middle East, most particularly in addressing responses to violence-prone weak states such as Libya and Yemen, and the more venomous security situation in Iraq and Syria. China has made great strides in widening and deepening its MENA policies under the governments of Hu Jintao and more recently Xi Jinping. Nonetheless, assuming a traditional non-aligned stance in many of the political and security issues and problems enveloping the Middle East, and especially since the post-‘Arab Spring’ period, due to its established great power status, has proven to be considerably more difficult for China.

There are some areas of MENA, including in the oil-producing Gulf region, in which China has been more successful in navigating local politics while avoiding the political

traps previously encountered by other large fossil fuel-consuming states, most notably Iran and South Sudan. However, both with the fall of global oil prices during 2015 and China's developing status as a great power and major energy player, Beijing struggles to separate politics from economics in the Gulf region while building an effective energy security strategy involving the six governments represented on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).<sup>1</sup> Energy politics will continue to take the lead in this area for the foreseeable future as China takes a long-term view of its concerns about access to external supplies.

As China continues to grow as a political and economic power, the country is more aware of its growing dependence on imported fossil fuels as it seeks to distance itself from environmentally damaging indigenous coal. Deteriorating air quality in the past few years, culminating in 'red alerts' of high levels of air pollution in the Chinese capital during December 2015,<sup>2</sup> have underscored the need for China to focus on diversifying its energy sources while seeking a more 'green' energy agenda. The Middle East, including the Gulf region, is becoming a more important source of both oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) for Chinese markets, and the GCC is slowly but steadily developing as a key energy partner for China. Within this relationship, Beijing has been seeking to diversify its diplomatic ties with the Gulf region alongside the potential for liberalized trade between the two actors. Since the turn of the century, as China begins to expand its interests in developing bilateral and sub-regional free-trade agreements, free-trade talks between China and the GCC have continued, with both sides expressing

hopes that a mutually satisfying agreement can be struck.

China is also approaching the Gulf region in a stronger position from which to debate the issue of energy security, defined as the need for access to energy supplies in order to maintain economic stability and national security. As global energy prices began their slide in 2015, Beijing became an early beneficiary of less expensive oil and gas supplies. Yet China is also well aware of the volatility of energy markets and the unpredictability of fossil-fuel markets, and remains committed to ensuring that the availability of external energy sources does not result in a large degree of vulnerability in China's future economic growth and modernization.

This paper will examine how China's developing policy of maintaining energy security has begun to form part of the dialogue between Beijing and the major states of the Gulf region, and whether Chinese views of energy security will differ from those of the West. Beijing has had to play catch-up in engaging the Gulf and in developing a deeper understanding of the complex diplomatic dynamics of the GCC, but this knowledge gap is quickly being closed, and energy security will be at the forefront of any bilateral dialogue between China and the Gulf states in the near future.

### **China and Gulf Politics**

The (Arabian / Persian) Gulf region, along with the greater MENA area, was an early beneficiary of the cross-regional diplomacy initiated by Beijing under the government of Hu Jintao (2002-12). As with other regions, notably Africa and Central Asia, energy and raw materials formed a platform for many of the diplomatic initiatives that China undertook in the Middle East, but there were ambitious attempts by China to further widen its policies in the region. It was during this period that the China–Arab Cooperation Forum (CACF) was created to act as a link between Beijing and the League of Arab States (LAS). Since 2004, the CACF has held

1 The members of the Gulf Cooperation Council are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

2 'Beijing's Smog Red Alert Enters Third Day as Toxic Haze Shrouds City,' *Agence France-Presse / The Guardian*, 21 December 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/21/beijings-smog-red-alert-enters-third-day-as-toxic-haze-shrouds-city>>.



biennial governmental conferences, the most recent in Beijing in June 2014.<sup>3</sup> At the same time there was an emphasis on the development of greater bilateral ties between China and Middle Eastern governments, including energy-producing states. During the Hu administration and the first years of the presidency of Xi Jinping, summitry between Beijing and Middle East policy-makers was frequent. Since 2004, China's relations with the Gulf states have also been dominated by efforts to develop a free-trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council,<sup>4</sup> efforts which have been complicated by economic differences and occasionally by politics.

Following a June 2009 negotiation meeting in Riyadh, FTA talks were temporarily suspended due to concerns within the GCC about Beijing's unwillingness to open its petrochemical sector to firms from the Gulf region.<sup>5</sup> Since that time, the Chinese government has called for greater flexibility and has been supportive of reaching a quick conclusion to the negotiations. Part of the reason for this is the major role the Gulf States play in overall Chinese trade with the Middle East. Between 2004 and 2014, this trade increased from approximately US\$20 billion to US\$230 billion, with seventy per cent being represented by the GCC membership. As well, one third of China's imported oil now is derived from the GCC states, with Saudi Arabia being the most visible partner.<sup>6</sup> The successful completion of a free-trade agreement would further deepen these ties, while bringing the region close to the Xi

government's 'belt and road' (*yidai yilu* 一带一路) trade routes, a concept which began to take form after 2013. Both the 'belt', meaning a series of overland trade routes connecting China with Europe via Eurasia, and the 'road', referring to maritime trading routes through the Indian Ocean between China on the one hand and Africa and Europe on the other, would involve the participation of MENA and Gulf governments. As a result, China has been anxious to conclude the FTA with the GCC (along with Sri Lanka) as a means of further cementing its 'one belt and one road' initiative.<sup>7</sup> In addition, several Middle Eastern and North African countries agreed to join the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in early 2015, including Iran, Israel and Jordan, as well as the Gulf States of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

The Chinese government has occasionally found it difficult to separate its Gulf diplomacy from its relations with the wider Middle East, especially in the wake of conflict and instability, along with the rise of the Islamic State (also known as *Daesh*) in much of the Mashriq region, especially Iraq and Syria. Like many other outside actors, China had to make rapid adjustments to its regional diplomacy as a result of the 2011-12 'Arab Spring' people's protests, which unseated many longstanding regional governments, including those of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen, and resulted in widespread violence and eventually civil war in Syria between the government of President Bashar Assad and various rebel groups seeking his removal.

Beijing's attempts to maintain a non-aligned policy at the start of the conflict were adversely affected in February 2012 when, along with Russia, China vetoed a UNSC resolution calling for Syrian President Assad to resign in the wake of the worsening vio-

3 Shannon Tiezzi, 'China Seeks Expanded Role in Middle East,' *The Diplomat*, 4 June 2014, <<http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/china-seeks-expanded-role-in-middle-east/>>.

4 'China FTA Network: Gulf Cooperation Council,' *Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China*, June 2009 <<http://fta.mofcom.gov.cn/topic/engcc.shtml>>.

5 Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, 'China-GCC Strategic Dialogue Resumes,' *Arab News*, 19 January 2014, <<http://www.arabnews.com/news/511401>>.

6 'Soft Power- China's Expanding Role in the Middle East,' *Deutsche Welle*, 4 February 2015.

7 Chen Jia, ' "Belt and Road" Plan "Set to Spur FTA Talks",' *China Daily* (Europe), 28 April 2015, <[http://europe.china-daily.com.cn/china/2015-04/28/content\\_20558913.htm](http://europe.china-daily.com.cn/china/2015-04/28/content_20558913.htm)>; Salah Takieddine, 'China Hand in Hand with Arab World to Push Silk Road Initiative,' *Xinhua*, 27 May 2015.

lence. By the end of 2014, China and Russia had vetoed four separate UNSC resolutions which sought to address the Syrian conflict.<sup>8</sup> Beijing justified its decision by suggesting that overt support for one side in the dispute would only lead to a further deterioration of conditions in Syria, but many Arab governments, including those in the Gulf, were not completely convinced. China's veto and its unwillingness to support deeper sanctions were sharply criticized in the United States and Europe and were greeted with unease among other Arab governments. Relations became especially difficult with Saudi Arabia over China's refusal to support a more concerted pressure against the Assad regime, further contributing to the sluggish pace of the free-trade talks between China and the GCC after 2011.<sup>9</sup>

The events of 2014-15, when Islamic State (IS) began to carve out territory in Iraq and Syria in the hopes of founding an Islamic caliphate, erasing the two states' mutual border in the process, has also posed a dilemma for Beijing. Although declining to formally join the Washington-led coalition to combat IS, China has joined the international community in condemning the movement and has raised concerns about a possible demonstration effect being created in the far-western Chinese territory of Xinjiang. More specifically, Beijing was concerned that the radicalism being spread by IS would find sympathy among extremists in China's far west. Reports which surfaced in November 2015 that a Chinese hostage had been beheaded by IS further indicated that Beijing was not immune to the effects of the deteriorating security situation in the Mashriq.<sup>10</sup>

While President Xi has, so far, been a less involved participant in Middle Eastern summitry in comparison with his predecessor, officials in his government have been more active in the region. For example, in January 2014, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a highly publicized tour of the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup> Xi himself had planned a visit to Egypt and Saudi Arabia in April 2015, which would have been his first to the Middle East, but the arrangements had to be postponed due to the worsening fighting between the Saudi-backed government of Yemen and Shi'ite Houthi rebels, who had established a rival government in Sana'a, and other splinter groups loyal to IS.<sup>12</sup> Despite the comparative lack, so far, of summit diplomacy in the region, the Xi government continues to view the MENA region, including the Gulf, not only as an important source of energy and resources, but also as an important component of the emerging belt and road initiative after 2013.

### The Energy Factor

Trade in commodities has also dominated the Sino-MENA relationship, including in the Gulf, as Beijing now views the region as an excellent source of raw materials, including phosphate, manganese, cobalt and fibres, for China's burgeoning textile sector.<sup>13</sup> As did the United States and Europe in the past, China has paid very close attention to the Middle East as a source of fossil fuels, and much of Beijing's diplomacy in the region has focused on energy trade. Notwithstanding its 'late-comer' status and its need to gather more political and economic information quickly about its GCC partners, Beijing has been

8 'Russia and China Veto UN Move to Refer Syria to ICC,' *BBC News*, 22 May 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27514256>>.

9 'China and GCC to Restart FTA Negotiations,' *Gulf States News*, 7 February 2014, <<http://www.gsn-online.com/china-and-gcc-to-restart-fta-negotiations>>.

10 Shannon Tiezzi, 'ISIS: Chinese Hostage "Executed",' *The Diplomat*, 19 November 2015, <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/isis-chinese-hostage-executed/>>.

11 'Wang Yi Gave an Interview to Al-Jazeera,' *Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China*, 9 January 2014, <[http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/wjbz\\_663308/2461\\_663310/t1116509.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/t1116509.shtml)>.

12 'China state Visit to Egypt, Saudi Arabia Delayed,' *Cairo Post*, 1 April 2015, <<http://thecairopost.youm7.com/news/144403/news/china-state-visit-to-egypt-saudi-arabia-delayed>>.

13 Gouda Abdel Khalek, 'The Impact of China on the Middle East,' *Journal of Developing Societies* 23(4) (2007): 425.

successful in establishing itself as a pivotal 'alternative' consumer base for the Gulf region's oil and gas. Despite China's attempts to diversify its energy partners mentioned above, the Gulf region remains its primary source of imported oil and gas. By 2013 Beijing's primary regional oil suppliers were in the Gulf region, especially Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar, and increasingly Iraq and Yemen, although the latter two states became less viable as energy partners after their security situations deteriorated in 2014-15. Beijing then looked to other parts of the Gulf region to be more stable politically in comparison.

China, like the other large energy-consuming powers, had a vested interest in ensuring energy exports from the region were maintained even as prices began to drop. While throughout much of the Cold War, China's interests in the Middle East were ideological and strategic, more economic issues began to gain prominence as China recognized the need to import fossil fuels, and Beijing, acknowledging the economic consequences of favouring either side over the other, has sought a balance in its policies on the Arab-Israeli conflict. The size of the Chinese market and its growing economic decision-making capabilities internationally make it unlikely that Beijing would be subject to a fuel embargo.<sup>14</sup> The strong American presence in the region, not only in Iraq, and also Washington's established (albeit wavering) political ties with Riyadh, does present a challenge for long-term Chinese energy diplomacy. However, growing Chinese power and interests in the region do raise the possibility of more direct diplomatic competition in MENA between the two great powers.<sup>15</sup> Saudi Arabia may increasingly view China as a counterweight to the west, while ensuring that ties to American and European

markets are not seriously damaged. Cooling US–Saudi relations, especially in the wake of the diplomatic convergence between the United States and Iran in 2015-16, further raised anxieties in Riyadh about the health of its American ties.

As noted previously, China has been more inclined to view liquefied natural gas as a cleaner alternative to coal, and growing demand for imported LNG had until recently been a major factor in Chinese relations with Qatar. In terms of overall trade the relationship has been a healthy one, with volume growing from US\$400 million in 2004 to US\$10.6 billion ten years later.<sup>16</sup> However, China's economic slowdown during 2015, as well as its move away from a concentration and more toward the service sectors, has had the additional effect of slowing Chinese demand for natural gas supplies.<sup>17</sup> Despite high hopes that LNG demand in China would spike in 2015 as a result of environmental concerns, the levelling off of imports, coupled with gas prices that remain high in China itself, did not bring about this anticipated scenario. Qatar is the largest external supplier of LNG to China, but trade dropped slightly in 2013-14, from 6.76 million metric tonnes to 6.73 million,<sup>18</sup> and the volatility of the energy market makes further predictions for future demand difficult. In early 2016, the Qatari government announced that, like Saudi Arabia, it was seeking to diversify its economy away from a high dependence on fossil fuels. China would be an important partner in this diversification process, especially regarding Qatar's industrial sectors.<sup>19</sup>

14 Zha Daojiong, 'China's Energy Security: Domestic and International Issues,' *Survival* 48(1) (Spring 2006): 179-90.

15 Flynt Leveritt and Jeffrey Bader, 'Managing China-US Energy Competition in the Middle East,' *The Washington Quarterly* 29(1) (Winter 2005-6): 195-6; G. John Ikenberry, 'Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia,' *Political Science Quarterly* 131(1) (Spring 2016): 9-43.

16 'Qatar – China Trade Volume Hits QR38.6bn in 2014,' *The Peninsula*, 17 December 2015.

17 'China's Natural Gas Use Plummets Despite its Pledge to Switch from Coal,' *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 11 December 2015.

18 Colin Shek, 'China's gas-import slowdown threatens LNG producers,' *Al-Jazeera*, 2 June 2015, < <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/06/china-gas-import-slowdown-threatens-lng-producers-150602104833809.html> >.

19 Peter Alagos, 'China Seen as Playing a Key Role in Qatar's Diversification strategy,' *Gulf Times*, 22 May 2016.



China has also sought to maintain energy relations with Iran, despite an ongoing international campaign led by the United States to isolate and sanction Tehran, especially in light of concerns about possible Iranian nuclear weapons development. China has been seen as a primary investor in Iranian energy infrastructure, much of which had deteriorated in the wake of US-led sanctions since the 1980s. Subsequent Chinese deals in Iran included a 2004 investment agreement in the Yadavaran area and a 2007 joint venture to develop natural gas in the North Pars region.<sup>20</sup> Iran's status as a primary producer of fossil fuels meant that Beijing felt it could ill afford to ignore the benefits of maintaining economic ties with Tehran even during the sanctions era. Once those sanctions began to be lifted in 2015, Beijing was quick to suggest new potential trade and development deals, the cornerstone being an economic partnership to increase bilateral trade to US\$600 billion over the next quarter of a century.<sup>21</sup> However, with the United States and Europe also eyeing the Iranian post-sanctions market, it remains to be seen whether Beijing can maintain the same degree of visibility in Iranian trade. As well, Iran may become a key component of the 'one belt and one road' plan, given the country's strategic location along both the overland and sea routes.

As with other parts of the Gulf region, Beijing has sought to expand its diplomacy with Iran beyond strictly matters of energy. In April 2015, an initial breakthrough was reached between Tehran and the 'P5 Plus One' grouping, which included China along with the US, Russia, and western European governments, that would impose restrictions on the Iranian

nuclear programme under international supervision. Beijing has been supportive of this process and has expressed hopes that the tentative nuclear deal signed with Iran in July 2015 would see Teheran finally emerge from international isolation. Beijing had traditionally resisted the use of economic coercion or the threat of force to settle this issue maintaining the view a diplomatic dialogue is the best way to prevent a potential nuclear crisis.<sup>22</sup> It remains to be seen, however, how the warming of relations between Iran and the west will affect Sino-Iranian energy relations in the coming years.

### What's Next?

Although fossil-fuel prices were continuing to fall at the end of 2015, China continued to build an energy security policy in light of its growing dependence on outside fossil-fuel sources in order to maintain growth and continue its process of domestic economic reform. Beijing will therefore continue to seek deeper relations with a diverse array of energy partners, especially in regions which are considered stable. In the case of the Gulf, although the region's monarchies were able to ride out the turmoil of the Arab Spring protests relatively intact, the conflicts of the greater MENA region, including Libya, the Islamic State crisis and Yemen, continue to chip away at the walls of the GCC and call into question the security of the energy relationship between China and the Gulf region. As well, China remains a recent arrival in the game of Middle Eastern energy relations, now having to compete with many western actors that have engaged with the Gulf for decades and have much more multifaceted economic ties with the Gulf economies.

A wild card in the China–GCC relationship remains their mutual free-trade negotiations,

20 Marc Lanteigne, 'Energising Links,' *The World Today* 63(7) (July 2007): 7; Alyssa Rallis, 'China–Iran Trade to Hit US\$25 Billion,' *Global Insight Daily Analysis*, 1 July 2008.

21 Golnar Motevalli, 'China, Iran Agree to Expand Trade to \$600 Billion in a Decade,' *Bloomberg*, 23 January 2016, <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-01-23/china-iran-agree-to-expand-trade-to-600-billion-in-a-decade>>.

22 'China Urges Flexibility in Iran Nuclear Talks,' *Reuters / International Herald Tribune*, 18 July 2008, 3; 'Full Text of the Iran Nuclear Deal,' *Washington Post*, 14 July 2015, <<http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/world/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal/1651/>>.

which will be an important additional step in the development of this bilateral linkage. The negotiations appear to be back on track due to growing summit diplomacy between Chinese officials and local Gulf governments, and a successful visit to the region by President Xi, expected in 2016, would likely elevate the process to an even better position. China has been successful in concluding difficult free-trade talks in recent years, including with the large economies of Australia and South Korea in 2015, and Beijing is very interested in further cementing its cross-regional economic diplomacy by adding the GCC to its list of free trade successes.

After much delay, President Xi was finally able to tour the Middle East in January 2016, visiting Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia. At the top of the list of Xi's interests during the tour were energy deals, as well as broader interests in expanding Chinese trade in the region. In his speech to the Arab League in Cairo during his trip, President Xi sought to stress the economic dimension of China's regional partnership while seeking to avoid the impression that Beijing was seeking to fill a supposed 'power vacuum'.<sup>23</sup> As well, many of China's emerging Middle East policies have begun to be integrated into a larger 'one belt and one road' strategy, which has included developing stronger maritime trade ties with the Middle East and North Africa. At the end of 2015, China also announced its intentions to construct a logistics centre across from the Gulf Region in Djibouti,<sup>24</sup> another sign that Beijing is placing a higher priority on trade security in the region and subtly balancing the west there. As China deepens its economic and energy relations with MENA,

it will integrate key parts of the Gulf region more fully into these diplomatic processes. Ultimately, however, it will be energy in the form of oil and LNG that will continue to set the tone for the growing diplomatic process between China and the Gulf, as Beijing develops its role as the alternative pole in region.

23 Cary Huang, 'Back to the Future: Chinese President Xi Jinping's Middle East Visit ... and His Middle Kingdom Dream,' *South China Morning Post*, 22 January 2016; Spotlight: Xi's Speech at Arab League Charts Course for China-Arab Cooperation,' *Xinhua*, 28 January 2016, <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/28/c\\_135052464.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/28/c_135052464.htm)>.

24 'China Hints More Bases On Way after Djibouti,' *Reuters*, 8 March 2016.





## CAN CHINA BE A PILLAR OF GCC SECURITY?

Imad Mansour

Increasing China's political involvement globally and expanding China–Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) trade in hydrocarbons have been hypothesized by some as the precursors of an expanded relationship between the two sides in the security realm. In fact, since at least 2004, GCC leaders have been establishing contacts with their Chinese counterparts to discuss the potential and parameters for what they term 'a strategic partnership'. These developments, together with apparent GCC questioning of current American policies toward the Gulf, make this an opportune moment to explore China's potential contributions to GCC security, asking the pertinent question of what China can offer to buttress the security interests of GCC states. Can China be a pillar of GCC security? By pillar is meant more than an ally or provider of military capabilities or weap-

ons systems; rather, as a pillar, a major power would be central in setting the parameters of the regional order and/or organizing regional security architectures. How should we think about the possibility of a committed security relationship of this sort, and what alternative relationships are likely?

In this paper I consider the question of whether China could be a pillar of GCC security in four steps: first, I look at the reasons why China is often discussed as a security partner; second, I examine the historical roots of two security-seeking strategies on the part of the GCC; third, I undertake a preliminary consideration of GCC decision-makers' positions on security ties with China; and fourth, I discuss what China could offer.

### Dimension one: China as a policy interest

Three global and regional factors help us understand the growing interest in what China can offer. First is the GCC's questioning of American commitments to its security

in light of what it sees as America's unfavourable policies on Iran, Syria and Iraq. The second factor is the American 'pivot to Asia', which, while not meaning abandonment, nevertheless has GCC states thinking of the trade-offs the United States (US) would be willing to make in pursuit of its interests that would compromise its presence in the Gulf. The third factor is China's tactical expansion into the Gulf and areas in the vicinity of the GCC, which have further animated talk about China's potential in ensuring the GCC's security; these moves include conducting training with Turkey and Iran, developing ties with the UAE and talk of China establishing a base in Djibouti. In essence, from the perspective of the GCC, China has become more present regionally, but without a concerted policy in which it presents itself as a security partner, let alone a pillar of regional security.

### **Dimension two: historicizing GCC security strategies**

GCC states have sought security for themselves through alliances with major powers, as well as intra-GCC coordination of capacities. Alignments with major powers predated the formation of most of the GCC sovereign states, and were often developed as means to offset rivalries between regional or local leaders and families; such alignments predated even the discovery of oil in the Gulf early in the twentieth century, with the British building or enforcing local alliances to secure trade routes to India. In the twentieth century, Britain and the US continued to be involved in local rivalries, helped develop the oil and gas sectors, especially through supporting expatriate companies, and aided state-building processes generally after independence. America's current security presence in the Gulf developed over the course of the mid-twentieth century, starting most concretely with its intervention to bridge Saudi Arabia and Iran ties in its 'twin pillar' strategy of the 1970s.

Simultaneously, visions of intra-GCC security architecture were motivated by a drive

to reduce dependence on the major powers and external assistance more generally. The idea of consolidating an indigenous security structure that was relatively independent of the major powers was circulating among Gulf Arab leaders as early as the early 1970s. However, pressures from Iran's policies in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution and the onset of the Iran–Iraq War converged to lead the GCC states to agree to accept the United States as an order-setter in Gulf relations, especially in being their main security provider. This did not prevent local security-building initiatives, one important and progressing achievement being the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF). However, GCC states have not yet developed a unified military and security framework, nor one that is independent of major power assistance.

Major powers have therefore long been part and parcel of Gulf politics and security. The possibility of China partaking more concretely in Gulf security, therefore, is nothing new. What is important, however, is how China can be part of the regional order, and whether it has what the GCC wants?

### **Dimension three: the limitations on China being a GCC security pillar**

Despite China's increased presence in the Gulf and in policy discussions, I contend that existing indicators all point to a reality that, for the foreseeable future, it will not be a security pillar for the GCC: that is, it will not fix the parameters of regional security architectures, as the US has done so far. This is because China is not prepared to supply the role of being a pillar, nor is there any demand for such a role on the part of the GCC.

The GCC states and their supporters among the major powers to date, Britain and the US, have so far had significant common grounds on which they agree and converge in their strategic perspectives on Gulf security, despite occasional disagreement on the specifics. This has been especially true with regard to the views of the GCC, the US and Britain



concerning who is menacing the regional order and who are their potential allies or friends. Aside from agreeing to develop trade in energy (and, to a lesser degree, financial investments), points of convergence between China and the GCC along these three dimensions today are unclear. Actually, the security interests of the GCC states remain focused on guarding against threats in their geographical vicinity: in particular, against Iran, Israel and of late Islamic State. Rather than convergence around these issues, there are important points of divergence with China that make a deeper security relationship difficult to achieve.

The GCC states see regional security through an Iran-centric prism: for them, China's 'neutrality' in foreign policy in effect translates into greater coordination with Iran, which makes China less desirable as a security partner. However, this GCC convergence on Iran (last officially confirmed in the 16 September 2014 meeting in Riyadh) does not preclude divergence within the GCC on strategies to deal with Iran. In addition to its established economic and military ties with Iran, China had played a role in bridging the American and Iranian positions on the nuclear issue, which did not sit well with the GCC. To this mediation was added Iran's framing of its position on Syria as protecting the latter's sovereignty and being in the interests of 'impartiality': the GCC states seem to see these Chinese positions as resulting in support of the Iranian position across the Middle East. Some GCC observers even note that Iran might not have been able to counter US pressures if China had adopted a different position. Thus, against the backdrop of GCC security concerns vis-à-vis Iran, and in light of China's statist logic, GCC decision-makers are unnerved by what they perceive to be the strong ties developing between China and Iran, which, importantly, are not paralleled by similar Chinese ties with them.

Israel is also of interest to the GCC, which understands that Israel's politics and veto power influences America's Middle East strate-

gies, especially the potential for the sale of advanced military capabilities. While China has promised to sell arms to the GCC states, it does not seem likely that it would assist them in such sales to such a degree that they would achieve military parity with Israel, or to a degree that would alarm the US. GCC leaders understand that the US is very likely to continue to monitor and probably approve international arms sales to the Gulf and the Middle East in general. Moreover, GCC leaders understand that China would not risk its relations with the US over this issue, and they themselves would not want to do anything to end American dominance in the Gulf. Therefore, from this perspective GCC leaders view the role that China could play in Gulf security (at least in their favor) as limited.

With respect to Islamic State (IS), Iraq and Syria, the GCC states are alarmed by IS's ability to threaten their domestic stability directly and challenge their legitimacy (discursively and materially), explosions having been the most visible manifestation of IS's intent to spread its operations more widely. In these respects, China's potential has remained almost negligible and seems unlikely to change significantly in the medium term.

In sum, from the perspective of the GCC, China has not developed clear positions or policies that would indicate a willingness to act to contain any Middle Eastern actor that the GCC perceives as threatening (especially Iran and Israel). Not only is China distant from the Gulf's messy and rivalry-ridden politics, it is actively avoiding regional conflicts and competitions and confining itself to benefiting from trade and economic exchanges; some GCC observers consider this Chinese position to be 'hypocritical'. The concern here for the GCC is that China is committed to developing its relations with Iran and Israel, from which it has been benefiting handsomely from trade in goods, investments and technology. It is clear that the US figures prominently in how the GCC perceives its options in relation to the major powers. Since the 2015 Camp David meetings following the

Iran nuclear deal, GCC decision-makers have made clear their comfort with America being their security pillar, tensions notwithstanding. In general, GCC observers do not see recent tensions as definitive, but rather as transitory.

#### **Dimension four: China's potential for GCC security**

While currently there are few 'concrete' indicators that China is becoming a pillar of the GCC's security, its more realistic contributions to GCC security mainly concern two issues: 1) the diversification of weapons sources, always in line with US approval; and 2) the consolidation and securing of trade. From the GCC's perspective, it is already diversifying its arms suppliers, a process that implicates China; this does not make China a pillar of GCC security. Moreover, since the GCC needs to secure shipping routes for the export of its hydrocarbons to Asia, it needs better ties with China and other Asian states. Hence, it is not a matter of shifting major power alliances, but of improving across-the-board relations.

Relative to security or military cooperation, it is clear that economic and trade relations between the GCC and China are bound to develop on firmer grounds, including commitments relating to Chinese citizens moving to live and work abroad. China has been expanding its security presence in the Gulf, as well as in Africa, in order to protect its investments and help those of its citizens who are residents there, for example, in order to evacuate them from unstable zones if needed. Therefore, by protecting such interests, China will give itself greater military and security visibility in the Gulf. Perhaps this aspect will be a viable medium for both China and the GCC to examine their common security interests.

#### **Conclusion**

In January 2016 China issued its first Arab Policy Paper (APP) in recognition of the expanding ties between these two parts of

the world. The APP, interestingly, referenced ongoing economic projects, perhaps to indicate successful models to be emulated, or to signal a significant level of conscious strategic coordination in its massive administrative body in dealing with issues of interest to Arab audiences. The APP mentions the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project and its expected benefits, though without noting how the GCC fits with this project; this is curious, since the GCC, and the Gulf generally, were also not mentioned in the OBOR map issued by Xinhua in 2015. It might be the case that building such a network to incorporate GCC states needs a certain level of intra-Gulf coordination and security dialogue, at least between Iran and the GCC. President Xi Jinping's comments in Saudi Arabia in January 2016 during a Middle East tour did note an interest in including GCC members; given Gulf tensions, it might indeed have been prudent for China not to have discussed strategy at this point. Then in February 2016, Iran and China inaugurated a massive international train route that will significantly reduce transport times. It remains to be seen what sorts of trade routes may be developed between the GCC and China.

To go back to the APP, in it was an interesting mention of collaboration on maritime security in the framework of the ongoing efforts of the 'international community': close observers of the GCC had previously posed questions as to why China does not develop – from the observer's perspective – a policy on maritime Gulf security independently of the existing one led by the western powers (i.e. the international community). The observer's note indicated how the GCC is processing China's regional politics in tandem with what the GCC sees the latter is developing with other Gulf states, especially Iran. So far, China–Iran military exchanges have been visible, and economic exchanges between them are more diverse than China-GCC ones; this dynamic is likely to continue in the next few years.

In the absence of any cataclysmic development or shock, GCC leaders are likely to

continue to assess the benefits of a security relationship with China through the prism of their enduring relationship with the US. That relationship includes hardware and training, as well as the personalized ties that American decision-makers have cultivated over decades, and is accompanied by high levels of GCC comfort in dealing with the American political mindset. Perhaps Chinese diplomacy, if it is interested, can ponder these dimensions in developing its own policy towards the Gulf.





## **CHINA-MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS: NEW CHALLENGES AND NEW APPROACHES**

Zhang Jiadong

Typically, Chinese interests in the Middle East mainly cover four areas: energy, politics, the economy and geopolitics. Even though energy security is still China's key concern in the region, its economic and political interests in the Middle East are also very important. In recent years, the role of the Middle East in the world has changed greatly due to the declining oil price and the rising terrorist threat. But for China, the importance of the Middle East has not changed much. China's energy dependence on the Middle East is increasing, as is the Middle East's influence on China in terms of terrorist threats and traditional security concerns. The strategic vacuum that the US has left leaves a lot of challenges and uncertainties for China. To respond to these challenges, China has initiated the One Belt

and One Road (B&R) initiative to strengthen its economic, political and people-to-people ties with regional countries. At the same time, however, China's military activity is still very hesitant and limited. Generally, China's policies towards the Middle East are changing quietly, slowly, but sustainably.

### **Traditional Chinese interests and policies in the Middle East**

Typically, Chinese interests in the Middle East cover four areas. Political ties are the foundation, while economic and energy ties are playing a growing role in China's relations with the region.

Since the establishment of the PRC, China has maintained good political relationships with almost all of the countries in the Middle East. Comparing to its strong political ties, China's economic, cultural and energy ties with the region were very weak during the Cold War. In China's first important multina-

tional show in 1954, the Bandung Conference, among the 29 members there were 14 from the Middle East, namely Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. Another representative from the region was the Mufti of Palestine. It is therefore very clear that the Middle East was crucial for the PRC's rise politically in the international arena. China today has good relationships with almost all the countries in the region, and they are partners in many international issues. Clearly, the Middle East has been an important diplomatic asset for China for decades.

Energy security is China's key concern currently in the region. China imports more oil from the Middle East than the other regions put together. In 2013, China imported 146.54 million tons of oil from the Middle East, which was 52% of its overall imported oil. In 2014, China imported 53% of all imported oil from the greater Middle East (plus North African Arab countries, such as Egypt, Libya, and Algeria).<sup>1</sup> Of the top 10 overseas oil suppliers of China, the Middle East has 6, which is Saudi Arabia (no.1), Oman (no. 3), Iraq (no. 5), Iran (no. 6), the United Arab Emirates (no. 9) and Kuwait (no. 10).

Economic interests are a growing factor in China's Middle East Policy. The Middle East is at a crossroads between three continents. The SLOCs through and surrounding the region are the key routes for world trade and communications. Trade via the Suez Canal represents 14% of total world trade. About 20,000 vessels pass through the canal, 10% of which belong to China. Since 2011, Europe has become China's biggest trade partner, with US\$ 567.2 billion worth of trade, and 60% of Chinese exports to Europe pass through the Suez Canal. China-Africa trade is also worth over US\$ 200 billion. The trade route between China and Africa also goes across the seas neighboring the Middle East. The Middle East is also an important market for Chinese goods

and Chinese construction companies. In 2011, Chinese companies received construction contracts worth about US\$21 billion from the Middle East. In 2012, trade between China and the GCC reached US\$ 15.50 billion. In 2013, trade in energy, goods and services between China and the Middle East amounted to nearly US\$ 300 billion. Arab countries are therefore key economic partners of China. In 2013, trade between China and the Arab countries reached US\$ 240 billion.

Geopolitical risk is a new concern for China. The Middle East is a part of China's Greater Neighborhood. The Middle East is also the religious and cultural center of an Islamic belt stretching from North Africa, through the Middle Asia and South Asia, to Southeast Asia. This Islamic belt fringes the western and southwestern parts of China. The Middle East is also the future direction of China's outward sea power. So what goes on in the Middle East not only influences China's economic interests, it also has an impact on China's security situation both abroad and at home. The role of the Middle East in China's foreign policy has been greatly transformed, from a politics-driven model, to a politics-plus-energy model, to a current combination-driven model that incorporates political, energy, economic and strategic concerns.

Partly thank to cautious policies and activities, China has a very good image in the Middle East. Almost all countries welcome China's presence in the region. Just as the UAE ambassador to China, H.E. Omar Al Bitar, said in 2013, 'the Middle East needs a fair arbitrator. This arbitrator should not have double standards and selfish intentions. Arab countries trust China because China is an affable and trustworthy country and also one permanent member in the UNSC.

### **New Challenges for China's Middle East Policy**

In recent years, many factors in the world and in the Middle East have changed. These will have an influence on China's policies.

<sup>1</sup> CPCIA website, <http://www.cpcia.org.cn/news/hyfx/2015-1/144924.shtml>, accessed 2015-10-22.



The change in energy structure is a new factor for China. The Middle East is the biggest region of fossil energy resources, but due to explorations for shale gas, shale oil and other new energy sources, such as wind and solar, and progress in energy-conservation technologies, the significance of the Middle East in the world energy structure is also declining. The importance of the Middle East for China's energy security will be also less significant in the future. That is, the turning point in Chinese energy consumption will be reached much earlier than expected. In the past, many analysts thought that this turning point would emerge around 2030, but according to China's National Bureau of Statistics' latest data, the country's overall energy consumption was 3.84 billion tons of standard coal in 2014. This represents a decline in the annual growth rate of 1.4 points compared to the previous year, the lowest growth rate during the past 16 years. China's energy consumption in 2015 was also less than expected. According to the CNPC's report, China's total energy consumption in 2015 was 4.24 billion tons of standard coal, an annual growth rate of -0.5%.<sup>2</sup> China's official data show 0.9% annual growth, just rising to 4.3 billion tons of standard coal in 2015,<sup>3</sup> its lowest growth rate. Some analysts believe that 'the turning point of China's energy consumption will be reached around 2018'. After 2018, China's energy consumption will fall.<sup>4</sup> The likely earlier turning point is due to two main reasons: firstly, the slowing down of the Chinese economy, particularly in manufacturing and the infrastructure building sector; and secondly, the restructuring of the Chinese economy. The service sector, or tertiary industry, has been playing a more and more important role in the Chinese economy. All these factors

have caused a change in China's conception of its energy security. In the past, China was mainly concerned how and where it can obtain oil. Today, it is more concerned about energy price and quality. China might therefore also rethink its policies on the Middle East, as energy may lose its status as a top priority in its diplomatic agenda in the region.

Following the likely decline of the importance of energy, the security risk has become a growing factor in China's Middle East policies. Terrorism, pirate attacks and religious factional conflicts are threatening not only the region, but also the rest of the world. Islamic State, AQAP, Somalia Shabab, Al Qaeda in the Maghreb and many other radical movements and organizations are exploiting the chaos and conflicts in the region. Iraq and Syria are becoming the new center of an international terrorism campaign that imports and exports large numbers of terrorists from and to other countries. Anti-China terrorist organizations are also using the Middle East as a base from which to train and launch terrorist activities against China. In September 2015, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP, formerly as ETIM) issued a Uighur-language video about its overall activities in northwestern Syria and its role in the recent fighting. The highlight is a feature about the 'little Jihadists' who will ensure the future of the Uighur Jihad. According to reports, lots of Uighur people has reached the village of Al-Zenbaka, not far from the city of Jisr al Shughur, which has a population of about 3,500. The presence of the TIP and other significant terrorist organizations in Syria also has a strong impact on China's relationship with relevant countries in the region.

Geopolitical risk is another issue that China faces. Traditionally, the US is the primary external factor in the geostrategic structure in the Middle East, but following the reduction of America's oil dependency on the Middle East, the intensity of its involvement in Middle Eastern issues is also declining. This change will cause lots of uncertainties in the region. China and other countries are looking

2 2015年中国能源消费出现30年来首次负增长, <http://futures.hexun.com/2016-01-26/182025675.html>, accessed 2016-05-22.

3 国家统计局 2015年中国能源消费同比增0.9%, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2016-02-29/doc-ifxpvutf3673351.shtml>, accessed 2016-05-22.

4 去年中国能源消费增速创16年新低 2018年现拐点, <http://money.163.com/15/0211/05/AI59CT3P00253B0H.html>

hard to find a perfect option to fill this strategic vacuum. There is a dilemma involved for China and other world powers: the US is declining in its desire and ability to handle the Middle East situation, but if other powers came in, the US would view it as fresh strategic competition and even as a brick in a greater strategic game. To avoid giving itself the image of a strategic competitor in the Middle East, China restrains itself from becoming involved more assertively and is instead focusing on economic and political cooperation with the regional powers.

China's changing identity is another factor. In the past, China's national interests were narrow and limited, greatly simplifying its foreign policy in the region. Following the rise of China, China's national interests have expanded to every corner of the world and every arena. These multi-faceted national interests are forcing China to rebalance its relations with the Middle East and revamp its own international image and status. For example, China voted in favor of UNSC resolution 1929 against the Iranian nuclear program, about which Iran was very angry. In 2012, China's then vice-minister of foreign affairs, Mr. Zai Jun, visited Syria, meeting the Syrian president and leaders of the opposition on the same visit. Even as China has tried its best to keep a balanced posture, many countries have criticized China's policy as supporting one side of the conflict in Syria. More importantly, in the past, China's identity as a developing country allowed it to talk to many countries in the Middle East. But today, in many countries' eyes, China is now a developed country. The economic gap is therefore creating a widening gap in attitudes between China and some countries in the Middle East.

### **China's New Approaches to the Middle East**

Traditionally, China's policies toward the Middle East were based on the principles of sovereignty, equality and non-interference in internal affairs. The main feature of Chinese foreign policy in the region is to maintain a neutral stance in all confrontations and con-

flicts, but this tradition will be hard for China to follow in the new situation. China needs a more proactive policy, despite its hesitancy and caution. In the process of rebalancing its rising capacity and typical self-restrained foreign policy, China is taking some new initiatives.

China has elevated the status of Middle Eastern states within its whole diplomatic architecture. In October 2013, the Chinese central government held a high-ranking conference specifically on neighborhood diplomacy, and in November 2014, China declared that the neighborhood states are strategically significant for its development and the international environment. Through these statements, China has changed the priority list of its diplomacy and has raised neighborhood countries to a similar high level with world powers. The Middle East is also a part of China's Greater Neighborhood.

The B&R initiative is the most ambitious initiative in China's diplomatic history. Even though energy ties between China and the Middle East may have been reduced temporarily, OBOR will increase the significance of the Middle East in China's strategic outlines. In the framework of a '21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road', the Middle East is the key node between three continents and also an important part of mutual communications and mutual linkages. In November 2014, the Qatari emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, said that the OBOR will provide important opportunities for China-Qatar cooperation in energy and infrastructure development. In December 2014, Egyptian president Sissi also hailed B&R and argued that it would revive the great ancient Silk Road between East and West.

People-to-people exchange and cultural diplomacy are new approaches for China in the Middle East. In order to promote China-Arab relations, both sides decided to declare 2014 and 2015 'China-Arab Friendship Years' and to host many exchange events. China will train 6000 experts and professionals for Arab

countries within three years and organize 10,000 artists from both sides to visit each other and to establish and support more than 200 China-Arab cultural institutes. In 2016, China, Egypt and Qatar will host different culture-year events respectively.

China will pay greater attention to security and political issues in the Middle East. In the past, China did not have a clear Middle East strategy or policy, particularly in the security sector. But since the anti-piracy operations off Somalia's coast, China has pursued a soft military presence in the Middle East. This is a notable change in China's foreign policy.

### **Short Conclusion**

Generally, China needs a new conceptual framework for its policy on the Middle East. Following its rise, China has more and more complicated interests in the Middle East, while many regional countries also anticipate that China should do more, and more active in the region. Partly as s respond to these calls, China has transformed itself from a neutral outsider to a strategic participant. However, in the foreseeable future, China will not serve as another strategic stabilizer like the US has done for decades due to its limited capacity and self-effacing traditional culture.





## CHINA'S MIDDLE EAST CONUNDRUM AND PROSPECTS FOR COLLECTIVE SECURITY

N. Janardhan

### Introduction

Few would dispute that there is a global foreign policy crisis – China's and Russia's anti-west foreign policies are more confrontational than constructive; Turkey's 'zero problem' foreign policy is witnessing an awful lot of problems;<sup>1</sup> India's 'play it safe' approach is indeed safe, but non-purposeful from a global

perspective; the United States' 'poke your thumb at others' noses', while its own is bleeding, is a lesson in what foreign policy ought not be; in following the United States on most issues, much of Europe has no independent foreign policy; and the less said the better about the foreign policies of the Middle East countries, which are either with or against the United States and the rest of the west.

The question that arises while pondering over these realities is – what drives foreign policy? At least four Ps come to mind – principle, profit, power projection and prestige. From the Middle East perspective, how the principal security guarantor – the United States – has fared on each of these factors explains its failures during the last decade, making us wonder about future alternatives.<sup>2</sup>

1 Turkish academic-turned-foreign minister-turned-prime minister Ahmed Davutoglu devised the 'zero problems with neighbours' doctrine in 2004 to overcome Ankara's disputes in the region. This was also meant to enhance relations among the regional states in the Middle East. However, a combination of Turkish foreign policy and events on the ground has left it with more problems than it started with a little more than a decade ago.

2 N. Janardhan, 'America's policy crisis,' *Khaleej Times* (UAE), 23 April 2012.

Adding another dimension to these crises is the Arab uprisings, which have been compared to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the 9/11 attacks in 2001, which impacted the political-security equations in the Middle East, and which have led to geopolitical changes and ideological rivalries to fill the power vacuum in the region.<sup>3</sup>

It is ironical that the Arab uprising, which began as an attempt to seek political freedom as a way of mending economic deprivation, has achieved neither. Instead, it appears that Mohamed Bouazizi did not just set himself alight in Tunisia four years ago; the flames from his self-immolation have set the entire region ablaze, triggering an international power struggle between and among both nations and non-state actors, thereby sending the global balance of power into a spin. There are strong indications that a transformation of the international order, currently consisting of a unipolar world, is either in progress or would follow as a result.

### **The Arab uprisings**

This evaluation is conditioned by the assessment that the Arab uprisings have reinforced the regional approach over the international approach. It is understood that most of the regional crises were triggered by the adoption of Western solutions, including the use of force. This has hastened the development of regional perspectives in resolving regional issues, which, in the context of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, could be traced back about a decade.

In the present scenario, far from international affairs affecting the region's politics, it was the events following the Arab uprisings that

influenced international affairs.<sup>4</sup> One of the most significant fall-outs of the uprisings was the reversal of rapprochement efforts on several fronts – GCC–Iran, GCC–Syria, Syria–west. Suddenly most of these efforts hit roadblocks in 2011, and the very actors involved in the rapprochement were and are still at loggerheads.

After largely being 'neutral' mediators, Arab countries began to take sides, supplied funds and arms to opposing factions, and even ventured into direct military action in Syria, Libya and Yemen.

The GCC stand on the Syrian crisis, in particular, became one of the factors that widened the Sunni–Shiite divisions in the region, intensifying Saudi–Iranian rivalry. The hostility between the two countries and the sects they represent became more pronounced than it was in 2011, thereby worsening regional sectarian divisions and insecurity. Nothing demonstrates this better than the gains of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Further, non-state actors have become greater enemies than states – Osama bin Laden may be dead, but the emergence of more radicalized outfits like ISIS has become evident across the region.

While these developments could be attributed to the decline of influence of great powers like the United States and Russia (until its dramatic intervention and pullback in Syria) in the Middle East, it is also leading to some sort of rapprochement between and among them. The warring United States and the Russia–China duo created a cooperative relationship to reach a deal on Iran, which may be repeated, along with the GCC countries, in the search for a political solution in Syria.<sup>5</sup>

3 Kayhan Barzegar, 'A turning point in the Middle East geopolitics,' *Global Affairs* (Russia), 24 June 2012.

4 Mohammad Sayed Rassas, 'How the Arab Spring altered the region and the world,' [www.almonitor.com](http://www.almonitor.com), 4 October 2012.

5 Daniel Levy and Julien Barnes-Dacey, 'Syria: the imperative of de-escalation,' [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net), 25 May 2013.



This may eventually facilitate GCC–Iran dialogue at some point in the future.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in September 2015, Qatar said it was willing to facilitate such a dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

Linking these developments to China requires an assessment of their impact on the United States – the “superbroke, superfrugal superpower”.<sup>8</sup>

The Arab uprisings have hastened the decline of US influence in a region that was already witnessing US fatigue with the region and the region’s fatigue with the United States. The fatigue on both sides has been greatly influenced by the Obama administration’s efforts to correct the military adventures of the George W. Bush administration, which affected the US domestic economy, thereby necessitating defence budget cuts and the ‘pivot’ to Asia.

The 2014 pronouncement that, ‘just because we have the best hammer (military) does not mean that every problem is a nail,’ is an important admission in Obama’s continued attempt to refashion American foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>

The only reason that most Middle East countries are still holding on to the United States is due to its security cover in a region that equates ‘national’ security with ‘regime’ security. In the event that there is likely to be a credible alternative, even in the distant future, American influence is bound to diminish enormously.

In this context, it is important to cast light on the security debate of the Middle East during the last fifteen years, which has revolved around two points of view: one, less international involvement in the region’s affairs; and two, greater internationalization of the region.

### Omni-balancing

Since the dominant view favours the second option, there have been calls to explore the idea of incorporating several international actors who could act as guarantors of any future regional security arrangement. Some Gulf leaders and intellectuals have issued statements in support of this idea.<sup>10</sup> Some examples include: ‘The major conflicts in the world have become too big for one single power to handle them on its own’ (Qatar);<sup>11</sup> and ‘*It is clear that the Saudis fully intend to pursue their national security interests much more assertively, even if that leads to a strategic break with the United States*’ (Saudi analyst Nawaf Obaid).<sup>12</sup>

It is this ‘failure of others’ in dealing with regional issues that has both reinforced the wisdom of exploring local solutions for local problems, as well as encouraging a ‘real strategic shift’ in the region’s foreign policy. Owing to the failure of the United States in the region and the shift in the economic power center from west to east, the GCC states began building ties with a host of alternatives, particularly in Asia.<sup>13</sup>

6 Though both are Islamic countries, they have historically been divided along sectarian lines, i.e. Sunni Saudi Arabia versus Shiite Iran. This ideological division, exacerbated by the 1979 revolution in Iran, has had profound political implications, influencing politics involving Bahrain, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and even the United States, among others. At the root of it is the ‘unfought’ war for leadership of the region and the Muslim world, in that order.

7 ‘Qatar offers to host Arab dialogue with Iran,’ [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com), 29 September 2015.

8 Thomas Friedman, ‘Superbroke, Superfrugal, Superpower?’ *The New York Times*, 4 September 2010.

9 Part of President Obama’s speech at a US military academy in May 2014.

10 For more on the security dynamics of Gulf–Asia relations, see N. Janardhan, *Boom amid Gloom: The Spirit of Possibility in 21st Century Gulf* (Ithaca, 2011).

11 Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani said this at the General Debate of the United National General Assembly in September 2007.

12 Nawaf Obaid, ‘Saudi Arabia gets tough on foreign policy,’ *Washington Post*, October 25, 2013. Recent developments in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen – where Saudi Arabia worked on its own, even if it contradicted the United States – proves that such statements are not mere rhetoric.

13 Christian Koch, ‘Gulf region makes strategic shift in new global system,’ *Arab News*, 22 October 2006; and ‘Gulf needs more, not less, external involvement,’ [www.gulfintimedia.com](http://www.gulfintimedia.com), 27 January 2006.

Thus, rather than put all their eggs in one basket, this 'omni-balancing' means that the region's ties with the United States are no longer exclusive.<sup>14</sup>

It is in this context that some Asian scholars have been pushing the idea of upgrading the GCC–Asia buyer–seller relationship to a strategic one. They are also exploring the possibilities for a new collective security architecture, which would involve both Asian and western powers, including the United States.<sup>15</sup>

The point is that Asian powers will have to stop riding piggyback on the US naval presence in the region's waters at some point and start finding their own means of securing their sea lanes. Assuming that America's involvement in the region will progressively diminish in the decades ahead, this opens up interesting possibilities by diversifying the number of security players catering to the region's security and stability.

### The China link

It is now easy to link this to China and its Middle East conundrum: strong, benevolent power (*wang dao*) or strong, interventionist power (*bao dao*)? This has been, is and will continue to be China's predicament not only in the region, but in the global context too.

Unlike China's ties with Africa, which are seen as 'resource imperialism', Beijing's interest in West Asia is referred to as a 'joining of equals'. Starting with the 'exchange of Arab oil for Chinese capital', it has developed into a web of two-way economic deals during the last decade and a half.<sup>16</sup>

In the realm of international politics, however, Beijing is considered a 'status quo power that often punches below its weight'.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless it is its energy security issue and global ambitions that keep it interested in West Asia's big game.

The prospect of a Chinese role in the region also arises because of its ties on the opposite sides of the political spectrum – with both Iran and Israel, as well as Saudi Arabia and the Palestinians. Further, as the water-bound trade picks up steam in the years ahead, China will naturally seek to protect its economic interests in the region's waters, which overlaps with the region's security interests. The fact that this would occur in a milieu of declining US military interest and political influence makes it more interesting. (The economic, political and security factors mentioned here are also applicable to India's West Asia policy in future).

The Chinese views on regional security are mentioned in government documents. Military improvements are part of the country's overall modernization and economic expansion. It sought to 'lay a solid foundation' by 2010, make 'major progress' by the end of 2020, and 'reach the strategic goal of building informationized armed forces and being capable of winning informationized wars by 2050'.<sup>18</sup>

This possibility is in sync with some predictions that the Chinese defence budget will surpass that of the United States by 2036.<sup>19</sup>

14 Concept propounded by Steven David of Johns Hopkins University.

15 Ranjit Gupta, N. Janardhan, et al., *A New Gulf Security Architecture: Prospects and Challenges for an Asian Role* (Gerlach 2014).

16 Stephen Glain, 'The Modern Silk Road,' *Newsweek*, 17 May 2008.

17 John Gittings, cited in Julian Madsen, 'China Makes Friends in the Gulf,' [www.asiasentinel.com](http://www.asiasentinel.com), 30 October 2006.

18 Edward Cody, 'China Offers Glimpse of Rationale Behind its Military Policies,' *Washington Post*, 30 December 2006; for more details of the Chinese navy's modernisation plan, see Bernard D. Cole, 'The PLA Navy's Developing Strategy,' China Brief, Jamestown Foundation (Washington), 25 October 2006; and 'China puts on huge show of force at parade, to cut troop levels by 300,000,' *Agence France-Presse*, 3 September 2015.

19 *The Economist*, 7 April 2012.

This also means that with power comes responsibility.

Extending its strategy to the West Asia region, China is increasing its multi-layered engagement. Beijing is already looking beyond the protection net provided by the United States, diversifying its energy suppliers, as well as developing new supply routes and port facilities through which it can import oil. Economically, China has offered billions of dollars in aid and loan guarantees to build its 'String of Pearls' at the Pakistani port of Gwadar, which is on the doorsteps of the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>20</sup>

It also announced the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative in 2013, which focuses on connectivity and cooperation among countries primarily in Eurasia, including the West Asian countries. Reviving the Silk Road project, an ancient trade route linking China to Persia and the Arab world, this initiative has two components – the land-based 'Silk Road Economic Belt', and the oceangoing 'Maritime Silk Road'. While these strategies are primarily economic in nature, they also underline China's desire to take on a greater role in global affairs.

Politically and strategically, the menace of Somali pirates hastened the involvement of the Chinese navy in the region's waters a few years ago. Beijing's signal in 2008 in sending warships to deal with it was seen as China's 'biggest naval expedition since the 15th century'.<sup>21</sup>

In late 2012, China rolled out a 'Four-Point Plan' for Syria that called on all sides to stop fighting, end the crisis and initiate a political transition, but it generated little international interest. And in March 2015, Beijing sent warships to rescue Chinese nationals from Ye-

men.<sup>22</sup> Further, Beijing is also worried about extremist elements in West Asia providing training and inspiration for Muslim separatists in its western Xinjiang province.

While these examples indicate that China is quite active in the region, the problem is that 'Beijing does not want to choose sides in a region that regularly demands it.'<sup>23</sup> In the current context, this is a prudent policy – one that was acknowledged even by US President Barack Obama earlier this year – China is a 'free rider...can't the United States be a little bit more like China?'<sup>24</sup>

Beijing has long espoused a policy of 'non-interference' in other countries' internal affairs. It opposed the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and voted with Russia to block action to end Bashar Al Assad's rule in Syria. It is not taking part in the coalition of sixty-odd countries fighting ISIS, despite its oil interests in Iraq and unsubstantiated reports of three hundred Chinese Muslims fighting there.

While Beijing committed combat troops to Mali in 2013 and has more personnel in blue helmets in Africa than any other permanent member of the Security Council, it is a reluctant actor in West Asia. This is because it feels it still does not have the 'ability' to lead in resolving current conflicts in the region.

In any case, why should it invest in clearing up the mess that the West has created? Further, China still has plenty of domestic issues to address. Given its vast population, it is still a long way from achieving prosperity across the board, which is the key to its political stability.

Taking no risk is sometimes the biggest risk, and China is being adventurous in inaction.

20 China becomes increasingly involved in the Middle East,' PINR, 10 March 2006.

21 'China sends naval fleet to Somalia to battle pirates,' *The Guardian*, 18 December 2008.

22 Ilan Goldenberg and Ely Ratner, 'China's Middle East Tightrope,' *Foreign Policy*, 20 April 2015.

23 Ibid.

24 Thomas Friedman, 'Obama on the world,' *The New York Times*, 8 August 2014.

The recent economic slowdown will encourage conservatism over adventurism. China surely has learnt from America's misadventures in West Asia, where Washington has earned itself more enemies than friends over the last few decades.

Yet, Beijing released a first of its kind 'Arab Policy Paper on China' in January 2016. This sets out the country's development strategies with Arab countries and mirrors its readiness to cooperate with them and to tap each other's strengths to ensure a win-win situation. More importantly, it reiterates its political commitment to peace and stability in the Middle East, which is mutually beneficial.<sup>25</sup>

Within days of releasing this paper, President Xi Jinping made his first tour of the Middle East since assuming office. By visiting Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt, especially during the height of the Riyadh–Tehran feud, Beijing clearly demonstrated that the region is very much a part its strategic focus, perhaps extending beyond business interests.<sup>26</sup>

While China is playing a calculated wait-and-watch game in a region torn apart by turmoil, Washington is worried about Beijing's moves elsewhere in the world, thereby intensifying their overall strategic competition.

## Conclusion

From a wider perspective, the pursuit of principle, profit, power projection and prestige by various actors through their foreign policies is transforming Middle Eastern politics, carrying the potential to alter the current geopolitical situation based on a unipolar world.

Whether or not China is interested in the region, the United States is worried about

Chinese inroads into the Middle East. It is important to note that, while Washington would desire 'a unipolar world and a multipolar Asia, China would prefer a multipolar world and a China-centric unipolar Asia'. How the United States will reconcile itself with a new world characterized by an emergent China – one that is not 'anti-US, but that approaches it as if it were a post-US world' – is crucial.<sup>27</sup>

25 Details of the policy paper are available at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1331683.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml)

26 For more on this issue, see 'Well wishing,' *The Economist*, 23 January 2016.

27 Fareed Zakaria, 'The future of American power: how America can survive the rise of the rest,' *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2008).





## CHINA IN SEARCH OF 'LEGITIMATE' GREAT-POWER INTERVENTION

Camilla Sørensen

### Introduction

Thanks to Beijing's expanding global role and interests, it is no longer possible for China to follow its traditional 'lay low' [*tao guang yang hui*] strategy and the traditionally rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention. Consequently, among Chinese International Relations (IR) scholars there is an intense debate on how China can protect and promote its global presence and interests while at the same time continuing to 'stay within' the principle of non-intervention. New concepts and approaches are developing as the debate progresses. One important example is the growing emphasis on the distinction between 'intervention' [*ganyu*] and 'interference' [*ganshe*] in China's diplomatic rhetoric and toolbox. Several Chinese IR scholars hence stress that, while 'non-intervention' continues to characterize the Chinese for-

eign and security policy approach, Beijing has started to interfere in developments and conflicts in other states and in the international system to a greater degree and also more proactively. Current Chinese foreign and security policy reflects a more flexible and pragmatic Chinese interpretation – and implementation – of the principle of non-intervention. This paper examines the search for 'legitimate' great-power intervention that characterizes both the debate among Chinese IR scholars and current Chinese foreign and security policy.

The paper proceeds in four main stages. First, it sets the scene by briefly outlining the ongoing developments in and the challenges facing Chinese foreign and security policy. Secondly, it provides a critical overview of the debate among Chinese IR scholars about whether and how to rethink and reform China's key traditional foreign and security policy guidelines. Thirdly, it examines China's more flexible and pragmatic interpretation and implementation of the principle of non-in-

tervention. In the fourth and last section of the paper the concluding perspectives are presented and discussed. The paper draws on interviews with Chinese IR scholars conducted by the author in Beijing and Shanghai in February-April 2014 and October 2015.

### **Chinese foreign and security policy in its changing domestic and international contexts**

The point of departure for this paper is two important questions about the further development of Chinese foreign and security policy. The first of these questions is, how will China's foreign and security policy change as its role, interests and capabilities increase and become more global? In recent years China's foreign and security policy has evolved in a contradictory manner, with signs of a more assertive, even aggressive, policy on the one hand and of a more cooperative and constructive, even responsible, policy on the other (Sørensen, 2015: 65-69). This provides the context for the second question, which is, what policies have the greatest and least likelihood of continuity in the years and decades to come? These are broad questions, and therefore the focus below is on one aspect of Chinese foreign and security policy, where the implications of Beijing's expanding global role, interests and capabilities are directly visible, as well as difficult for the Chinese leadership to deal with, namely China's adherence to the principle of non-intervention, which is one of its key traditional foreign and security policy guidelines.<sup>1</sup> However, it was crafted in a different international environment in which China had few economic and security interests to protect outside its own borders (Duchatel, Brauner and Zhou, 2014: 1-4).

China's globally expanding role and interests are being driven in particular by its growing need for imports of energy and raw materials in order to maintain domestic economic growth and stability, which continues to be the top priority for Chinese leaders. However, China's globally expanding role and interests make it impossible to comply with the traditional 'lay low' [*tao guang yang hui*] strategy and the traditional rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention. Increasingly Beijing has its own strong stakes in how domestic politics in other states develop and how international conflicts and crises are managed and resolved (Godement, 2013).

The pressure on the traditional 'lay low' strategy also arises from strong concerns in Beijing about living up to growing domestic expectations of how Chinese leaders should more actively and directly protect and promote Chinese nationals, investments and activities abroad and in the process show a willingness to demonstrate or even use China's strengthened economic and military capabilities. This relates to growing domestic demands to (re)gain international status and respect for China as a great power. Strong nationalist voices, in particular expressed online, are spurring such expectations and demands (Wang and Wang, 2014). The Chinese military, the PLA, has also increased the pressure on Chinese leaders to seize opportunities to try out China's now improved power-projection capabilities, as seen in the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Yemen in early April 2015 (Duchatel, Brauner and Zhou, 2014: 15; Panda, 2015).<sup>2</sup> Hence, domestic politics play into this as well with the important point here being that, in their efforts to deliver, Chinese leaders will most likely effectively end the traditional Chinese policy of non-intervention.

1 The principles of non-intervention [*bu ganyu*] and non-interference [*bu ganshe*] are often used interchangeably by Chinese International Relations scholars and in official Chinese documents. As discussed further below, however, it seems that a clearer distinction between these principles has been emerging recently, as well as greater clarity in their usage.

2 The 2013 Chinese Defense White Paper for the first time underlined the protection of overseas energy resources and Chinese nationals overseas as major security concerns and as tasks for the Chinese military; cf. 'The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces', Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, April 2013.

With respect to the dimension of domestic politics, several Chinese IR scholars argue that Beijing is no longer so concerned about other states intervening in China, for example, because of Tibet or Taiwan. China earlier insisted on the principle as a way of self-protection as well, which today, with the development of a stronger and more self-confident China, no longer appears to be such a big concern (cf. also Duchatel, Brauner and Zhou, 2014: 7-8).

Finally, the traditional 'lay low' strategy is challenged by the fact that China can no longer free-ride on the US role as 'the global policeman' guaranteeing international stability and other international public goods: the US is no longer willing or able to do all the hard work in, for example, the Middle East to the same degree. As a consequence, international expectations and demands are growing on China to assume greater responsibilities and play a more active role in managing and solving international conflicts and crises – to be 'a responsible stakeholder', in other words (Wang, 2011). In this respect, it is interesting to see several Chinese IR scholars stressing how much Beijing fears the US reducing its presence in the Middle East, rather than seeing this as a strategic opportunity for itself (cf. also Godement, 2013).

The important point here is that these international and domestic expectations and demands, which are challenging the traditional 'lay low' strategy and the traditionally rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention, are not leading to or promoting the same developments in Chinese foreign and security policy; rather, they are pulling in different directions.

### **Rethinking and reforming China's key traditional foreign and security policy guidelines: the debate**

Among Chinese IR scholars, there is an intense debate on how China can protect and promote China's global presence and

interests while at the same time continuing to respect the principle of non-intervention; that is, how China can intervene – or interfere – in a 'legitimate' way. This debate on intervention/non-intervention is closely related to the ongoing debate among Chinese IR scholars on the 'lay low' strategy (cf. e.g. Zhu, 2010).

Chinese IR scholars participating in the debate on intervention/non-intervention tend to express the same frustrations on widely different issues and examples. A broad consensus seems to be developing about the need to rethink and reform – few say 'give up' – the principle of non-intervention and develop a Chinese approach of 'limited intervention' [*youxian ganshe*] and 'creative involvement' [*chuangzaoxing jieru*] that could serve Beijing's expanding global role and interests better (cf. e.g. Wang, 2012). However, most Chinese IR scholars also acknowledge that adopting such an approach and a policy that is not afraid to take sides and that favors particular domestic outcomes in other states is also very complicated and opens up a whole array of new challenges (cf. Godement, 2013: 1-2). A key concern driving this debate is therefore how to become more actively and constructively involved in international affairs on the one hand and better protect and promote Chinese global interests on the other hand, while at the same time continuing to respect the principle of non-intervention and not end up conducting foreign and security policy like the 'hegemon' (that is, the US) and risk creating greater instability and chaos in the international system. This is not an easy puzzle to solve. Added to the complexity is the key Chinese argument – or insistence – that China is a different kind of great power than the US/the west that does not intervene militarily or overthrow other regimes in order to protect and promote its own narrow interests. This relates to the Chinese distinction between the kingly way ('rule by virtue') [*wang dao*] and the tyrant way ('rule by force') [*ba dao*], which is central to the Chinese debate and China's perception of it-



self as a great power; China, of course, acts in the kingly way (cf. Zhu, 2010: 23-26).

One group of Chinese IR scholars, in emphasizing the importance of China being 'a responsible great power' [*fuzeren daguo*] with a positive international image, tends to promote stronger Chinese cooperation with other great powers and a more active Chinese role in both international and regional multilateral organizations. However, another group of Chinese IR scholars emphasizes the importance of advancing and protecting China's globally expanding role and interests. It therefore argues that China should become more active in using its growing economic and military capabilities abroad to promote a more active, but also strongly unilateral, Chinese foreign and security policy. As a result, China's different balancing games, as in the Middle East, where Beijing generally tries to maintain friendly relations with everyone, are seen as ineffectual. China therefore needs to choose and take a stand more clearly, with a focus on protecting and promoting its own interests (cf. Godement, 2013). Related to this argument, some scholars, like Prof. Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University, further argue that it is necessary for China to get rid of its principle of non-alignment entirely (Yan, 2012).

The debate among Chinese IR scholars provides an important window in identifying and understanding emerging trends in the evolving Chinese foreign and security policy. However, before discussing the criteria for 'legitimate' great-power intervention that are often highlighted by these scholars, it is useful to examine briefly China's current foreign and security policy.

### **Rethinking and reforming China's key traditional foreign and security policy guidelines: the policy**

The development of Chinese foreign and security policy in recent years reflects a more flexible and pragmatic Chinese interpretation and implementation of the principle of

non-intervention. China has become more deeply and more proactively involved in the politics of other regions, for example, in the politics of the Middle East and of Africa, and Beijing is also seeking to shape political developments in other states to a greater degree (cf. e.g. Wang, 2012). In relation to several international conflicts and crises, Chinese leaders have presented diplomatic suggestions and offered to play a mediating role, for example, in relation to Sudan and Afghanistan. Furthermore, Beijing has been seeking to play a more active and constructive international role by strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation with other great and emerging powers and regional organizations, for example, in relation to Iran and the Iranian nuclear crisis.

China's commitment to and involvement in UN peacekeeping has also been deepened further. In September 2015 the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, gave a speech at the general debate of the 70<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly, announcing that China will join the new UN peacekeeping capability readiness system, and even take the lead in setting up a permanent UN peacekeeping police unit, itself establishing a strong standby peacekeeping force of 8,000 troops. Xi Jinping further reported that China will establish a ten-year, \$1 billion China–UN peace and development fund 'to support the UN's work and promote the multilateral cooperation cause' (Adler and Sidiropoulos, 2015; Xi, 2015). And lastly, indicating the growing Chinese emphasis on the importance and role of regional organizations, Xi Jinping announced that Beijing will provide \$100 million of free military assistance to the African Union in the next five years to support the establishment of the long-awaited 'African Standby Force' and the 'African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis' (ACIRC) (ibid.).

As a result, during his five-day African tour in early December 2015, Xi Jinping announced a Chinese plan to build a logistics facility for its navy in the East African state of Djibouti.

This was presented as a logical next step in China's growing willingness to act as a protector and provider of regional security and development, specifically referring to the Chinese role in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa and in the anti-piracy operations off the Somali coast (Page and Lubold, 2015). China clearly also has its own narrow interests in establishing what is likely to become its first overseas military base. No matter whether this is called a military base or not, it represents a clear departure from the traditional rather strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention and the long-held Chinese position that China – in contrast to the US and other western great powers – does not want to deploy its military on a long-term basis overseas.

There are also signs of a kind of Chinese 'stick and carrot' diplomacy, where Beijing has started to show increased willingness to use its now stronger economic and military strength to influence the domestic politics of other states and to protect and promote Chinese national economic and political interests, as shown by China's use of commercial diplomacy in its relations with several East Asian states (Reilly, 2012). With respect to the maritime territorial disputes in East Asia, Chinese leaders have also increasingly used coercive diplomacy and military means (Sutter, 2015: 110-112). Lastly, there are cases where Beijing continues to insist on the strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention, as in relation to Syria. The 'lesson of Libya' and the general Chinese suspicion of western, especially US, motives for intervention are often included in China's arguments for the importance of upholding the strict interpretation of the principle of non-intervention in general and for the Chinese position on the Syrian conflict specifically (cf. Ren, 2014; Jiang, 2015). The more specific Chinese concern here is that the US could use the 'responsibility to protect' [*baohu de zeren*] as an excuse to turn regime change into a new norm in international relations (cf. e.g. Godement, 2013).

To sum up: China has gradually developed a prudent and pragmatic case-by-case approach, which underlines the extent to which its position and policies on non-intervention, territorial integrity and sovereignty are conditional. This in itself is not new – the principle of non-intervention is a key guideline in China's diplomatic work and a major rhetorical tool, whereas there has always been a degree of flexibility in how China actually conducts its foreign and security policy when it comes to non-intervention. The important point here, however, is that the context and conditions are changing, as are Chinese interests and instruments. Beijing now has a stronger role and greater influence in the international system, as well as greater economic, political and military power to deploy, and this has clearly changed the importance and implications of the Chinese intervention or non-intervention. Also, there are, as discussed above, growing expectations and pressures, both domestically and internationally, on Beijing to engage and interfere proactively and not maintain the more passive and reactive ways of the past.

### **Great power intervention with Chinese characteristics in both debate and policy**

As highlighted above, Chinese adherence to the principle of non-intervention is not synonymous with Chinese inaction, and the debate among Chinese IR scholars and China's current foreign and security policy both provide clues about its evolving 'management' of the principle of non-intervention.

The typical Chinese way of 'crossing the river by feeling for the stones' seems best to characterize the Chinese efforts to find tactical ways of dealing with the many new expectations, demands and interests facing Beijing both domestically and internationally. While insisting that China will stay within the principle of non-intervention, certain criteria for 'legitimate' great power intervention are being set up – that is, an intervention that does not break with the principle of non-intervention. However, the criteria then seem to

be continuously adjusted, with some criteria being accorded less importance, while new ones are added. Hence, it is not so much China's rhetorical support for – and emphasis on – the principle of non-intervention that is changing, but the Chinese criteria for 'legitimate' great-power intervention.

The main criterion for 'legitimate' great-power intervention stressed by Chinese IR scholars and Chinese diplomats alike is that there is a UN resolution in place and thus broad international support behind the intervention. This focus on UN authorization relates to how Beijing sees the UN as the highest international authority, as expressed in Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at the general debate of the 70<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015 (Xi, 2015). However, there are indications that a UN resolution is becoming less of an ultimate demand and that the focus is shifting more to the importance of an invitation or request from the country in question. Nonetheless it is unclear from whom the invitation is required – all groups in the country? This is not likely to happen in the case of a political crisis in the country concerned. From the leading group, therefore? But then China would be taking sides in the country's political crisis. In relation to these questions, there are some Chinese IR scholars who then emphasize the need for a request and for support for Chinese intervention from the regional organization involved, such as the African Union (cf. also Duchatel, Brauner and Zhou, 2014: 5-20).

Another criterion often highlighted by Chinese IR scholars, the importance of which is also reflected in how Chinese foreign and security policy is conducted, is the involvement of China's own national interests, whether this is a matter of economic interests, Chinese citizens, or China's political and security interests (cf. also Wang, 2012). This criterion is also often related to the question of China's military capability and ability to intervene, where Chinese IR scholars often highlight how, despite rapidly increasing

military spending for many years, China still needs many more years to build up its overseas military infrastructure and its capacities to project its power globally.

Regarding the focus on the involvement of the Chinese military, it seems that Chinese IR scholars have recently started emphasizing and further specifying the distinction between 'intervention' and 'interference'. As mentioned above, the principles of non-intervention [*bu ganyu*] and non-interference [*bu ganshe*] are often used interchangeably by Chinese IR scholars and in official Chinese documents, but this may be changing. New developments here include what looks like a narrower definition of intervention, where it is only defined as 'intervention' if military instruments are used. This further implies that Chinese involvement or interference in another state's economic and political development, its playing a mediating role, its seeking to participate actively in 'nation-building' etc. are no longer defined as 'intervention'. Whether this narrower definition develops into an official one remains to be seen, but the fact that several Chinese IR scholars mentioned it in interviews conducted by the author in China in October 2015 at least underlines the strong urge in China to rethink and reform the principle of non-intervention. If the Chinese definition of (great power) intervention is changing and becoming narrower, then this makes possible a great deal of 'legitimate' Chinese involvement and activities in other states, as well as generally in the international system.

Summing up, what Chinese IR scholars tend to stress when presenting their 'way' of intervention – the 'legitimate' way – is that the criteria mentioned above are fulfilled and that Chinese intervention – or interference – always includes and mobilizes all the local forces or groups in the particular country concerned. It is often emphasized how domestic groups need to lead the negotiating process and thus how outside forces such as China can only play a support role. The focus is on what Chinese IR scholars

often term 'the national interest' [*guojia liyi*] of the particular country, which implies that China always seeks to take in the whole picture and the long-term view, as well as to avoid taking sides or using military instruments to create or enforce stability (cf. also Wang, 2012).

As China has gradually integrated itself into and expanded within the international system, its foreign and security policy has become subtler and more sophisticated, with different dimensions and areas, as well as a growing inconsistency between Chinese foreign and security policy principles and practice. Despite the efforts of several Chinese IR scholars and diplomats to frame China's growing and more proactive involvement in other states' domestic affairs as something other than intervention and interference, there is no doubt that current developments in Chinese foreign and security policy involve making some fundamental choices about strategic priorities and old dogmas and doctrines; there are limits to how long these can be stretched and creatively reinterpreted while still retaining their credibility.

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## CHINA'S PROACTIVE DIPLOMACY IN AFGHANISTAN: A CHALLENGE TO THE PRINCIPLE OF NON-INTERFERENCE

Miwa Hirono

### Abstract

Does China's diplomatic action in conflict-affected regions still fall within the principle of non-interference, or does it go beyond the principle to interfere in domestic affairs if necessary to defend China's national interests? In answering this question, China's approach towards Afghanistan offers important insights into how China's diplomacy has become more proactive and interfering today, while it still maintains the principle of non-interference legally. However, China's proactive diplomacy has brought with it a new challenge in abiding by the principle of non-interference, because the extent to which China can maintain the principle in practice is affected by how it manages its relationship with rebel groups.

### A shift in China's approach to the principle of non-interference?

Analysts of China's foreign policy have paid attention to the fact that the country has shifted its approach to the principle of non-interference since the beginning of the 2000s. For example, China has agreed to all UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions on peacekeeping authorized under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which authorizes 'all necessary means' to intervene in countries (Hirono 2014). These operations are very intrusive in the sense that they effectively allow various actors to intervene in a sovereign state, but, of the five permanent members of the UNSC, China is now the biggest contributor to such UN peacekeeping operations. More recently, the idea of China's changing approach to the principle of non-interference has also been applied to the analysis of China's efforts in conflict mediation. James Chen (2015), for example, states that 'in 2013 China shifted its principle of "non-interference in other

countries” to one of active conflict resolution in some of the world’s most intractable contexts: Israel-Palestine, Myanmar, and Afghanistan’.

One of the contentious issues in China’s approach to the principle of non-interference is how it deals with non-state actors. In the case of peacekeeping, the host state is the sole institutional actor that China engages with, whereas in mediation, China must deal with rebel groups as well as the host state. China’s diplomacy used to be based on government-to-government relations, but now it has been developed further to be able to deal with rebel groups in conflict mediation, while still maintaining the principle of non-interference as its key foreign-policy principle. How do we understand this contradiction? What does a shifting approach to non-interference mean in practice in conflict mediation?

This paper focuses on the important case of China’s diplomatic action in Afghanistan, and assesses the extent to which China has retained or modified its approach to the principle of non-interference. The paper will first unpack the principle and identify some of the key elements that define it. By using these elements as a starting point for discussion, the paper will then examine the extent to which China’s diplomatic action in Afghanistan still remains within the principle of non-interference.

The paper argues that, despite the common view that China has shifted its approach to non-interference, in the case of Afghanistan it has actually abided by the principle of non-interference legally, as defined by the United Nations. However, China’s proactive diplomacy has brought with it a new challenge in abiding by the principle of non-interference, because the extent to which China can maintain the principle in practice is affected by how it manages its relationship with rebel groups—an element that China cannot necessarily control.

### **What does non-interference mean?**

Despite the fact that non-interference is a central term in international relations, very few studies provide a clear definition of the term. Among the key official documents that provide the international legal basis for the term are paragraph four of the UN Charter, Article 2, and the ‘Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention and Interference in the Internal Affairs of States, A/RES/36/103’ (9 December 1981) (hereafter ‘Declaration’) (Hess and Aidoo 2010). Paragraph four of the UN Charter, Article 2, states ‘all Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations’ (United Nations, 1945). The ‘Declaration’ points to a number of more specific state rights and duties to protect the principle of non-interference. Among them, three are the more relevant to this paper:

1. ‘The duty of States to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any form whatsoever to violate the existing internationally recognized boundaries of another State, to disrupt the political, social or economic order of other States, [or] to overthrow or change the political system of another State or its Government;
2. The duty of a State to refrain from the promotion, encouragement or support, direct or indirect, of rebellious or secessionist activities within other States, under any pretext whatsoever, or any action which seeks to disrupt the unity or to undermine or subvert the political order of other States;
3. The duty of a State to abstain from any defamatory campaign, vilification or hostile propaganda for the purpose of intervening or interfering in the internal affairs of other States’ (Declaration).

I will use these three ‘State duties’ as the starting point of my examination of how China is approaching the principle of non-interference in its diplomatic action in Afghan-



istan and to analyze why China is acting in the way it does.

### ***Use of force?***

It is clear that China firmly abides by the principle of non-interference in relation to the use of force in Afghanistan, despite international expectations that it provides force and cooperates with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). First of all, in 2009 the US suggested that China opens its Wakhan Corridor as NATO's supply route into Afghanistan, but China ignored the suggestion (Bhadrakumar 2013; Szczudlik-Tatar 2014, p. 2). In 2008, UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown invited China to join ISAF, but China refused (Spencer 2008). Closer to ISAF's withdrawal in 2014, there were a lot of expectations and speculation in both the media and the policy and scholarly communities about what China could do in post-ISAF Afghanistan (e.g., Oxford Analytica Daily Brief Service 2012; Tiezzi 2014). Given that China uses its military assets for non-UN international operations such as disaster relief, anti-piracy operations and non-combatant evacuation operations, it is not inconceivable that China could use force (Hirono and Xu 2013), but it has shown no interest in replacing ISAF in the future.

There are two major reasons for this. First, China did not want to place its forces under the command and control of a foreign force. The historical experience of humiliation deriving from its semi-colonization led China to adopt an 'independent foreign policy of peace' involving strict independence from foreign militaries. China's independence in its military affairs was also one of the key issues in relation to the NATO and EU-led international anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, which China refused to join, instead maintaining its own transit corridor only five nautical miles away from the NATO and EU-led international corridor (Hirono and Xu 2013). Further, in the case of Afghanistan, China was critical of the unilateral approach NATO has been accused of taking. In the words of Wang Yizhou, ISAF was committing itself to a 'new interventionism,' which 'bor-

rowed the cloak of legitimate intervention, but it is actually exceeding its authority and working for its own interests' (Renmin Ribao 2011). Secondly, even since the end of ISAF operations in 2014, China has still not been interested in using armed intervention in Afghanistan because of the inefficacy demonstrated by ISAF over the previous thirteen years. Ren Xiao of Fudan University even stated that 'the withdrawal of ISAF and US forces from Afghanistan may eliminate one of the drivers of conflict in the country' (Ren, cited in van der Kley 2014, pp. 5-6).

### ***China's relations with the Taliban***

With regard to the second duty of a state to 'refrain from the promotion, encouragement or support, direct or indirect, of rebellious or secessionist activities', the key question of interest to this paper is whether, and if so how, China has promoted, encouraged or supported the Taliban's activities.

What follows is a brief history of the relationship between China and the Taliban. Since the late 1990s, when the Taliban formed the Afghan government, China sought its assurances that it would not let Uyghur militants launch attacks against China from Afghan territory (Small 2015a, p. 129). In December 2000, Lu Shulin, China's ambassador to Pakistan, became one of very few foreigners who managed to meet Mullah Mohammad Omar, the then Afghan head of state, who agreed to China's request not to support Uyghur militants (Small 2015a, p. 129; Bangash 2001). In return, 'Omar sought two things from China: formal political recognition and protection from U.N. sanctions' (Small 2013). However, China ended up not giving the Taliban diplomatic recognition. When it came to sanctions, China's response was ambivalent. At the UNSC, China used the usual tactic of abstention from voting on Resolution 1333 relating to sanctions against the Taliban, but did not use its veto (Small 2013; UN 2000), meaning essentially that it tacitly approved them. At the same time, China also 'established trade links that would help mitigate the impact of the sanctions' (Small 2013).

During the war from 2001 to 2014, China maintained a low profile (Zhao 2013, pp. 5-9; Pantucci 2010), but then became 'an active and enthusiastic supporter of reconciliation between the Taliban and the Afghan government' (Small 2015b). This is due to the view among the Chinese policymakers that reconciliation is the only way to prevent Afghanistan from 'becoming a safe haven for Uighur militants and a destabilizing force across the wider region' (Small 2015b). China hosted the 'Heart of Asia' or 'Istanbul Process' meeting in Beijing in October-November 2014, which aimed to promote 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> To that end, China invited the Afghan government and the Taliban to the meeting. Although the Taliban did not show up, China hosted a delegation of Afghan Taliban officials in Beijing in December 2014 (Hodge, Totakhil and Chin 2015), and reportedly again in May 2015 (Stancati 2015).<sup>2</sup> It is not clear what was achieved in those meetings, but a report suggests they 'aimed at discussing preconditions for a possible peace process' (Stancati 2015).

There are two observations to make here. First, if we take the wording of the 'Declaration' (i.e., 'refrain from the promotion, encouragement or support, direct or indirect, of rebellious or secessionist activities') literally, China's aforementioned support to the Taliban would appear to be an infringement of its duty. However, the spirit of the Declaration relates to the second half of the sentence: 'any action which seeks to disrupt the unity or to undermine or subvert the political order

of other States'. China's aim in maintaining contact with the Taliban is, rather, to stamp out overseas bases for Uyghur 'terrorists' and to ensure the success of the Afghan peace process. Therefore, to say that China has 'violated' the principle of non-interference is quite out of context. One can conclude that China has actually abided by the principle of non-interference legally in its dealings with the Taliban.

Second, China's relations with the Taliban deserve attention, as they go beyond its traditional 'government-to-government' approach. When China's national interests are at stake, it is prepared to make contact with rebel groups. China's current intention to maintain contact with the Taliban in the context of the peace talks also derives from its national interests: preventing terrorism and safeguarding its security and economic interests in Afghanistan. China's economic interests in Afghanistan – particularly copper fields in Mes Aynak – are in the hands of the Taliban. Further, the One Belt One Road and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will go through Taliban-controlled areas in the northern part of Pakistan. China cannot afford to endanger an important part of its more than \$500 billion investment.

### **'Hostility'?**

The third duty brings out the question of whether China is responsible for 'any defamatory campaign, vilification or hostile propaganda'. Defamation, vilification and hostility are subjective terms. To what extent does the Taliban think that China is mounting 'hostile propaganda' against it? As mentioned earlier, China has maintained a low profile in Afghanistan for a long time. Thus, 'China's role in Afghanistan is seen as neutral as the Taliban [has] never fostered any hostility with their northeastern neighbour, which does not have any military or strategic ambitions for the country' (Khan 2014).

However, a couple of examples show that some factions of the Taliban seem to perceive China as being hostile to it, because

1 The 'Istanbul Process' meeting delivered 'Beijing Declaration', in which participants 'call[ed] on all parties to encourage the Taliban towards reconciliation' (Heart of Asia, 2014).

2 Mullah Abdul Jalil, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Rahmani and Mullah Abdul Raqaq, all of whom are based in Pakistan, were said to have participated in the talks, but the Taliban claims that the talks did not take place and that only those members in its Qatar-based political commission are entitled to participate in peace-related talks. However, the Taliban often denies publicly the existence of peace efforts, while confirming them privately. See Stancati (2015) for details.



of China's policy towards its Muslim populations, as well as its close relations with Pakistan and the current Afghan government. The Taliban has attacked China's Mes Aynak copper mine nineteen times (Brazier 2012; cited in Downs 2012, p. 78), and dozens of Chinese engineers and workers have been kidnapped (Huanqiu 2010).<sup>3</sup> Some analysts claim that 'militants blamed China for the Pakistani government's 2007 decision to launch an assault on the Red Mosque, a pro-Taliban stronghold in Islamabad, and duly retaliated with a series of attacks on Chinese workers in Pakistan' (Small 2013; see also French 2007; Pantucci 2010, p. 23; Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel 2014, p. 80). Added to this, China's relations with the Taliban are now experiencing significant challenges, mainly deriving from the death of its leader Mullah Mohammad Omar – so-called 'China's Man' – in 2013. After his death the Taliban became more fragmented, so even though China attempts to maintain contact with the Taliban to try and bring it to the peace talks, there are numerous factions within the group that are separate from those who participate in the talks (Small 2015b).

The principle of non-interference is indeed tricky. Even though one may intend to abide by the principle, ideas such as 'hostility', which are a part of the definition of the principle, are subjective, so there emerges a perception gap between China and the rebel groups about the nature of China's activity in Afghanistan. China's proactive diplomacy has brought about a new challenge to the aim of abiding by the principle of non-interference, as the extent to which it is *perceived* to be doing so depends on how well it and the rebel groups can manage their relationship. But of course, when even the identification of factions in the rebel groups is difficult, managing a relationship with them could be a 'mission impossible'.

3 Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel (2014, p. 71) has a useful map showing a number of attacks against Chinese workers in Afghanistan.

## Concluding remarks

This paper has demonstrated that, despite the common view that China is shifting its approach to the principle of non-interference, it actually abides by the principle legally. It has also observed, however, that China has gone beyond its traditional approach to diplomacy based on government-to-government relations, and has maintained its relationship with the Taliban in order to safeguard its national interests. The paper has also discussed the subjective nature of the principle of non-interference in the context of whether a state mounts 'hostile' propaganda.

Even though China actively supports reconciliation talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, how successfully it can maintain relations with the Taliban depends on the Taliban's own situation and how China can manage the gap in perceptions between its intentions and what the Taliban considers it is doing to the group, as well as to Islam as a whole. The international community should have certain expectations with regard to China's role, but they need to be realistic, as China is grappling with a very complex problem – on that ISAF was unable to resolve during its thirteen years in Afghanistan.

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## **PHOTOS**

*Coverphoto:* Saudi Arabia Deputy Crown Prince and Chinese President Xi Jinping, lead their delegations in a meeting in Beijing

*Page 12:* The sun sets behind an oil pump in the desert oil fields of Sakhir, Bahrain

*Page 17:* Group picture during Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC 7th summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

*Page 22:* An ethnic Uighur muslim family passes in front of a giant statue of Chairman Mao

*Page 27:* Chinese Navy sailors march past a warship at port before leaving for the Navy's first overseas operation

*Page 33:* Chinese police officers wearing the United Nations blue helmets practice hand signals with weapons during a demonstration at a training camp

*Page 40:* Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah walks with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang past the honor guard during a welcoming ceremony in Beijing





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